

AIDS Lecture February 2, 1987

Address

By C. Everett Koop, MD, ScD
Presented to the National Religious Broadcasters
Washington, DC
February 2, 1987

The audience to which this address was presented reminds me to inform the reader of several things. First of all, in the Reagan Administration it was not unusual to speak openly to religious groups, nor was it unusual to speak about and to specifically Christian religious groups. The second thing that is noteworthy, is that I was doing something at about the time this address was given that I don't think any other public official ever did, and that is, during the early weeks of 1987 I spoke largely to religious groups of all stamps and denominations as well as liberal, moderate and conservative. And finally, this lecture was given shortly after I had spoken informally to a similar group that met under the title of Christian Booksellers of America.

On that occasion, I was as specific as I could be and reminded them that the same sources that might have taught them concerns about homosexuality and homosexual practices were the very sources that admonish them that sin had to be separated from the sinner.

It was only nine days since the last time I had spoken publicly about AIDS and this the first address in which I mentioned treatment of AIDS with AZT, which did nothing to cure the underlying disease, but did prolong the life of the victim.

One of the most important sentences I ever uttered or wrote was contained in the AIDS Report released on October 22nd the previous year: "We are fighting a disease and not the people who have it". I reiterated that theme here noting that as Surgeon General it was my job to wage all out-war against disease and not against people. This enabled me to make the statement that I believed that I was a moral person. I became a doctor because I am a moral person. It was my personal dedication to healing and to caring for others that led me to medicine and then led me further to accept President Reagan's invitation to be the country's Surgeon General.

I made a specific plea to this audience to join me in this fundamentally moral crusade against the brutal, humiliating, and fatal disease.

I not only gave the post office box and telephone numbers that could be used to obtain copies of the Surgeon General's report, but I repeated the information.

One of the disturbing things about the first Reagan Administration – and note that I'm not accusing Mr. Reagan himself – was the fact that many presidential appointees in high places believed that because AIDS was spread by behaviors that most people did not do and certainly did not approve of others doing, the victims probably deserved what they got and we shouldn't concern ourselves too much about them. I struck out against this as often as I could, sometimes pointing out that we never showed preferential treatment to victims of disease based on the manner in which they got their disease and on this

occasion I said it this way: “The moral bottom-line for me – and I’m sure it is for you as well – is that I hope they live (the AIDS victims) and I must do whatever I can to help them live”. It certainly was a contradiction of what many people heard privately from government officials close to the President, and I wanted this group of religious broadcasters to know that that was not an official government stance.

Inasmuch as there had been a lot of criticism of me in the press, in magazines, and by correspondence, because of my firm belief that you can’t teach children about the avoidance of sexually transmitted disease until they know something about their own sexuality – and therefore, need some “sex education”. I took this opportunity to reiterate what I had said before, but I said it in a different way: “I’ve been attacking sex education curricula that just teach technique and don’t mention responsible morality...and I took that position before some of my critics knew there was such a thing as sex.” I embellished it by saying that we have only a few years of grace to help the young child understand his or her own sexuality before the onset of puberty, and that although, a parent should handle this education of the child and can claim to be the best educator or the educator of choice – I doubted that they could become the exclusive educator. I even offered another alternative to the term “sex education”. Not only could we call it AIDS education, but also we could call it “Health and Human Development Education.”

I faced some of my critics down and let this audience know the kind of things that were being said about me: “Sponsoring homosexually oriented curricular”, or “Teaching buggery in the third grade”, or “Providing condoms to eight-year olds”. There is one explanation I delivered to this audience that might not be understood by the ordinary reader. Before coming to Washington, I had engaged with one of the better known apologists of the Christian faith, Francis Schaeffer, in a project that included five one-hour films, a major book, and a tour of twenty cities in America, where we held three-day seminars on the whole topic entitled, “What Ever Happened To The Human Race?” That will set the reader’s mind to understand a comment: “And to that member of the religious right who wrote that the noise he heard is Francis Shafer rolling over in his grave...I say, that noise I hear is more likely his applause”.

I went on to address this group – or at least the Christians among them – to tell them they would be continued to be tested by tremendous questions that arise from the turmoil of public events and that these questions should cause them to examine and re-examine who they are and what they stand for. I went on with illustrations about homosexual behavior, separation of the sin from the sinner, safe sex, abstinence, and mutually faithful monogamy, as well as the protection of a condom for people who don’t hear those messages.

This is also the first time that I ever reminded the audience that as time moves on there would be more and more truly innocent people being infected by the AIDS virus who were going to die. And they included the wives of bisexual men, the spouses of I.V. drug abusers, and the wives of promiscuous husbands. I also counted among these victims babies born to I.V. drug abusers or otherwise infected mothers. These youngsters were being abandoned or dying alone in hospital nurseries.

I closed these remarks with an admonition to religious broadcasters. I reminded them that when the aforementioned Francis Schaeffer and I had called their attention to abortion as an issue that had to be addressed by religious bodies, they drew their skirts around themselves and shunned the issue of abortion. I asked them, indeed pleaded with them, not to repeat that slice of history.

Abortion
Abstinence
All-out war against disease
AIDS vaccine
AIDS virus
Azidothymidine (AZT) as treatment
Babies born to mothers with AIDS
Critics of the Surgeon General's Report
Fighting a disease & not the people who have it
"Health & Human Development" instead of "Sex"
Education
Heterosexual & homosexual activity
Innocent victims of HIV infection
Michigan State University's research into exposure
of youngsters to sexual intercourse
Mutually faithful monogamy
Parents as sex educators
Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia
Pornography in American life
Predictions about the future statistics
Safe sex
Sex education & morality
Statistics on AIDS
Support by religious broadcasters of the efforts of
the Surgeon General
Surgeon General's Report on AIDS – how to
procure one
Spouses of I.V. drug abusers
The religious right
Wives of bisexual men
Wives & husbands of promiscuous spouses

AIDS
"Baby Doe"
Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist
Convention
National Coalition of Black & Lesbian Gays
National Conference of Catholic Bishops
National Council of Churches
National Education Association
National PTA

Francis Schaeffer
Synagogue Council of American
The Washington Business Group on Health
“What Ever Happened to the Human Race?”