

Congressman Henry A. Waxman
Comments to Residents in Preventive Health at CDC
Sponsored by the Brookings Institution
March 9, 2005

Thank you for the opportunity to talk about public health policy with you today. Every year I am fortunate enough to be invited by the Brookings Institution to speak with this group ... and every year I enthusiastically accept.

I realize that as residents in preventive health, you will soon be on the front lines of public health. You will save many lives from infectious diseases, smoking, diabetes, obesity, and other harms. Part of my job is to clear the way for experts like you to have the resources and freedom you need to promote the public health.

It's always been a challenge. I've been in Congress for 30 years, and one thing I've learned is that unless there is a crisis, few pay attention to public health. And even when there is a crisis, Congress and our government can still fail to take constructive action.

Some roadblocks to progress are ideological. Others are political or economic. Often we need to fight for what is obviously needed: an evidence-based approach to public health policy.

I represent West Los Angeles, where the first cases of pneumonia caused by Pneumocystis (NUMO-CISTIS) were reported about 25 years ago. It quickly became clear that a deadly new immune system disorder was spreading in the gay community. Despite the urgent need to address the problem, President Reagan made a decision not to mention the word AIDS.

At the time, I was the chair of the health subcommittee of the Energy and Commerce Committee. We held many hearings that gave public health officials a platform to tell the nation the truth about what was going on. We also passed legislation

ensuring that researchers and public health officials had resources to identify and fight this new virus. And we passed the Ryan White Care Act to provide critical resources for treatment.

These were major accomplishments, but the ideological push against public health on AIDS did not subside entirely. In recent years, it has surfaced again.

Here are some of the recent developments that concern me:

- The President attempted to appoint someone to his advisory council on AIDS who has described the disease as a “gay plague” and homosexuality is a “deathstyle.” (When these comments were reported, the appointee withdrew his name.)
- At the National Institutes of Health, leading researchers have been told to keep certain words out of their abstracts to avoid extra scrutiny – words like gay, homosexual, lesbian and bisexual. Just last month, HHS officials told a scientist making a presentation on suicide among gays and lesbians to take the word “gay” and “lesbian” out of the title.
- At CDC, duplicative layers of review are now required before HIV prevention materials can be approved. The National Association of State and Territorial AIDS Directors have criticized these changes as unnecessary and burdensome.
- HHS is spending over \$100 million on so-called “abstinence-only” education that has serious factual flaws. For example, one curriculum said that AIDS can be

transmitted through contact with sweat and tears. Others provide grossly misleading information about the effectiveness of condoms for HIV prevention.

This political interference with public health is wrong and dangerous.

Another issue I have worked on for many years is tobacco. Some of you may recall the hearing when leading tobacco executives testified that nicotine is not addictive and cigarettes were never marketed to children. And nobody believed them.

It was obvious what was going on. The tobacco industry had poured millions of dollars into bogus research designed to deny the obvious harmful effects of their products. By 1994, when we held those hearings, the truth was catching up to them.

This was a major victory. The release of industry documents has led to a range of state and local efforts to fight smoking and encourage cessation.

Ten years later, there is still so much more to accomplish. But in the last Congress, we held just two hearings on tobacco.

These hearings did not address the urgent need to make smoking cessation services available to millions of Americans, even though an HHS subcommittee found that a few simple steps could save 3 million lives and help 5 million smokers quit.

These hearings did not investigate the continued marketing of cigarettes to children using flavors like key lime and colors that look like crayons.

And these hearings did not focus on the failure of many states to spend even a bare minimum amount of funds from the Master Settlement Agreement on tobacco control.

Believe it or not, Congress's two hearings addressed the wonderful potential of smokeless tobacco products to reduce the harm of smoking. The nation's largest manufacturer of smokeless tobacco had asked for the hearings to help with the marketing of their addictive and cancer-causing products. And the Republican leadership complied—twice.

Again, this political approach to public health is wrong and dangerous.

We need to keep fighting for resources for tobacco control, because the evidence shows it will save many lives – both in the United States and around the world.

We also need to urge the President to send the global tobacco control treaty, known as the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, to the Senate for ratification. It is disgraceful that our nation, with its history of leadership on public health, is seen as an obstacle to progress against the scourge of tobacco by our international allies.

These fights will be challenging. But we must succeed to allow people like you to save as many lives as possible.

A third issue I have worked on for a long time is lead poisoning. Several decades ago, the lead industry fought virtually every standard put into place, arguing that the evidence of harm to children was overblown.

Over time, the evidence has only gotten stronger. Where 60 micrograms per deciliter was once considered safe, now the standard for action is 10 micrograms per deciliter. Moreover, it is now widely accepted that there is no threshold for lead's ill effects, and many believe the action level should be lowered to 5.

Yet the battles continue. Recently, the Bush Administration rejected the nominations of three leading scientists to the CDC's lead poisoning advisory committee. In their place, the Administration appointed several individuals with ties to the lead

industry. One individual, who is now on the committee, recently testified in court on behalf of the lead industry that a lead level of 70 micrograms per deciliter causes no harm to children's brains.

Political officials denied the lead industry had anything to do with that appointment. But that account was later contradicted--- by the appointee himself. He told a journalist that he had been contacted about the position by the lead industry.

Recently, I have been concerned about a series of recalls of lead-containing products for children. In the last 15 months, over 150 million pieces of toy jewelry or metal charms have had to be recalled. There have been lead hazards in vending machines in every community across the country.

The Administration's answer is a grossly inadequate policy that permits 175 micrograms of lead in each part of each piece of toy jewelry. So a little ring comprised of 10 beads could have one thousand and one hundred and seventy-five micrograms of lead – a potentially lethal dose.

This is yet another policy that is wrong and dangerous.

With the support of the American Academy of Pediatrics, I have introduced legislation to ban lead in children's products. We cannot continue to rely on children to be the testing systems for our consumer products.

To conclude, let me just say that as public health professionals, your primary concern is the practice of public health, not the politics.

But where politics interferes inappropriately with what you do, you should make your voice heard – either to trusted supervisors within CDC, or to professional associations, or directly to Congress. You should recognize that there are those of us in Congress who are fighting to let you do your jobs.

Together, we can work to keep politics and ideology from subverting public health. So many lives hang in the balance.

Thank you very much.