

Koop and the AIDS Crisis

The Top Doc's Changed Image

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C. Everett Koop looks every bit the hard-line moralist, with his stern goatee and the military uniform that comes with his job as surgeon general of the United States.

When the pediatric surgeon from Philadelphia was chosen by President Reagan in 1981, his record of public campaigning to ban abortions and his allegiance to traditional "family values" made him a favorite of Moral Majority-style conservatives.

The 70-year-old Koop says his views have not changed, but the AIDS crisis — and his pragmatic, far from moralistic reaction to it — have turned his image topsy-turvy.

Many of his old conservative friends want Koop's scalp for urging AIDS education in the schools and condom advertising on television. Gays and liberals consider him a national hero for opposing mandatory AIDS tests and speaking out against discrimination toward AIDS carriers.

Obviously enjoying the difficulty people are having in pigeonholing his brand of public health, Koop recently told an interviewer, "I take that as sort of a compliment, I guess."

Koop's unique role will be illustrated dramatically tomorrow when he addresses a joint session of the California Legislature in Sacramento.

His speech will be nonpartisan, but his hosts will be the Legislature's liberal Democratic leaders. They are unabashedly hoping to capitalize on Koop's prestige in their effort to pressure Republican Governor Deukmejian. They want the governor to spend more than the \$21.4 million he has proposed for the year ahead to fight AIDS and to sign legislation he had vetoed that would ban discrimination against AIDS victims.

SURGEON GENERAL'S ADVICE ON AIDS



Surgeon General C. Everett Koop

- AIDS education as early as elementary school "so that children can grow up knowing the behavior to avoid to protect themselves."
- An end to the networks' self-imposed ban on condom ads because "the threat of AIDS is so great, it overwhelms other considerations."
- No mandatory testing for exposure to the AIDS virus and no quarantines "because AIDS is not spread by casual contact."
- No tattoos of those who are infected, as some conservatives have suggested. "AIDS should not be used as an excuse to discriminate against any group or individual."

neuvering.

"The public health issues become more important to him than anything else," said one of Koop's top advisers. "He's not interested in the local politics. He is a man with a mission."

Jim Brown, Koop's aide, said Koop's seemingly liberal stand on AIDS, embodied in a report he issued last October, stems simply from his strong sense of duty.

said. "He has a lot of old-fashioned values — abstinence until you're married and a faithful, monogamous relationship. But there are people who will not listen (to such advice), and he thinks you have to tell them how to protect themselves from catching AIDS. He has to take into consideration that people could die if they didn't know what to do."

It is that attitude that has earned Koop his surprising new collection of friends — and enemies.

"He's been incredibly good, and we really didn't expect it at all," said Urvashi Vaid of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "He came out of what we thought was a right-wing, Christian background. Once he started meeting with people and preparing his report, he came to his own conclusions. It's made a tremendous difference."

By contrast, Robert Grant, chairman of the evangelistic Christian Voice group, described Koop as a good man getting some bad advice.

"Dr. Koop is taking an Alice-in-Wonderland approach to coping with the worst epidemic in world history," said Grant. "It calls for drastic measures, not for putting a Band-Aid on cancer, which is what condoms are to AIDS. He should recommend abstinence. The sexual revolution is over. It's come to a screeching halt. People must become adults and get their drives under control."

Koop said recently that no one in the Reagan administration has demanded that he curb his comments, although he has lately begun to stress family values as the most important part of sex education in schools.

Koop has not backed off from his fundamental message.

"If you regard homosexual behavior as a sin," he recently told a convention of religious broadcasters, "please remember that one of your fundamental teachings has been to 'separate the sin from the sinner.'"