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Dr. Koop's Decent AIDS Dissent

Even after 26,566 reported cases and 14,977 deaths, Americans tend to whisper when they talk about AIDS. Welcome, therefore, the loud voice of Surgeon General C. Everett Koop. His is a message Americans need to hear, and it rings with added credibility from someone of such rigorous stature in this Administration. No one needs to hear it more than this Administration's Justice Department.

In many communities the response to AIDS is ignorant, superstitious, inhumane. Dr. Koop's is informed and compassionate. "Many people, especially our youth, are not receiving information that is vital to their future health and well-being because of our reticence in dealing with the subjects of sex, sexual practices and homosexuality," Dr. Koop writes in a report requested by the White House. "This silence must end. We can no longer afford to sidestep frank, open discussions. ... Education about AIDS should start at an early age so that children can grow up knowing the behaviors to avoid to protect themselves from the AIDS virus."

The report, a 36-page booklet, is specific about how AIDS is and isn't spread — which makes it just the kind of frank discussion for which Dr. Koop pleads. "AIDS," he says, "is not spread by casual, nonsexual contact. It is spread by high-risk sexual

and drug-related behaviors — behaviors that we can choose to avoid."

To that end, Dr. Koop would like to see strong sex education at home and in the schools "at the lowest grade possible"; an increased use of condoms, and the use of clean needles and syringes by drug addicts. He opposes compulsory blood testing to identify those who may have been infected with the virus, or any efforts to quarantine them.

A copy of his report ought to be delivered to the Office of Legal Counsel at Justice. Last summer, that office ruled that employers who receive Federal funds may dismiss victims and carriers of AIDS because they need not be considered handicapped and entitled to protection against arbitrary dismissal. To have AIDS is to be handicapped, according to this ruling, but being able to spread it is not. If, despite all medical evidence, an employer believes that AIDS can be spread through casual contact, he can send the sufferer packing.

Compare that callous response to the AIDS crisis with Dr. Koop's view: "It is time to put self-defeating attitudes aside and recognize that we are fighting a disease — not people." May that recognition come soon, across the country, and across the Administration.