

Promised Sex-Ed Report Languishes

By DIANA JEAN SCHEMO

WASHINGTON, April 19 — It was billed as a "Surgeon General's Call to Action."

In the waning months of the Clinton administration, Surgeon General David Satcher laid the groundwork for a far-reaching report on sexual attitudes and education. The paper appeared set to showcase the tolls of sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies on the young and urge comprehensive sex education in every grade, along with measures that would "promote responsible sexual behavior" like improved access to contraception.

The report was never published, and now, with the Bush administration in office, Dr. Satcher's call to action seems to be falling to a whisper. It is not clear what form, if any, the statement will take. Dr. Satcher declined to be interviewed on the question, and his office says only that any statement will most likely avoid the controversial areas it once appeared ready to cut through.

"It doesn't take a lot of political math to figure out what happened here," said James Wagoner, president of Advocates for Youth, a group supporting comprehensive sex education that attended two retreats with Dr. Satcher's staff to work on the issue.

Last week, the group sent Dr. Satcher an angry letter expressing concern that the call to action seemed to have been suppressed.

Scientists, health experts and others who worked on the paper differ on why Dr. Satcher did not simply publish before the election. Some say the paper was delayed because he and his lieutenants worried that a call for sexual responsibility from President Bill Clinton would carry little credibility. Others say that Dr. Satcher, who serves at the pleasure of the president, worried about alienating George W. Bush, a supporter of abstinence-only education, which avoids advice about condoms and other forms of contraception.

Explanations from the surgeon general's office have been all over the map.

Dr. Satcher's spokesman, Damon Thompson, initially disputed that a call to action was ever to be released. Rather, Mr. Thompson said the surgeon general had convened the retreats as "listening sessions" to determine whether he could find common ground between two camps that have polarized the debate over sex education: supporters of comprehensive sex education and those who would teach abstinence until marriage as the only alternative.

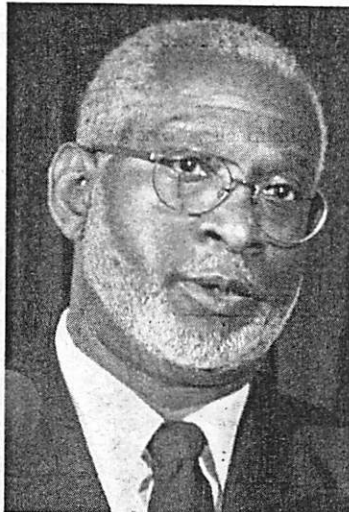
However, after being read Dr. Satcher's invitation to a retreat in July "to develop recommendations for a publication to be titled a Surgeon General's Call to Action on Promoting Responsible Sexual Behavior," Mr. Thompson changed his explanation, saying that it had taken longer than anticipated to work through the drafts. Now, he says simply, the situation has changed.

"There have been a lot of days and nights since then," Mr. Thompson

said. "I'm not at liberty to say what the thinking is now, but there have been changes."

Dr. Janet S. Hyde, chairwoman of psychology at the University of Wisconsin, and Dr. Eli Coleman, professor of family medicine at the University of Minnesota, submitted their draft for the call to action to Dr. Satcher in September. Declining to discuss its specific recommendations, they directed queries to the office of the surgeon general at Dr. Satcher's request. Their draft has been under wraps since.

With Republicans taking control of the White House, Dr. Satcher, whose four-year term ends in 2002, remains surgeon general. But he has lost his post as assistant secretary of health



Associated Press

Dr. David Satcher became surgeon general under Bill Clinton. His term ends in 2002.

and human services, and the staff of 200 that goes with it. Now, his staff is four people, Mr. Thompson said.

A spokesman for Tommy G. Thompson, secretary of health and human services, said nobody from the current administration had seen the draft or worked on the paper.

Damon Thompson, Mr. Satcher's spokesman, said it was expected that the paper would "find some common-ground issues on which we can proceed to work to improve public health in this area, while leaving some of the other, more contentious issues unresolved."

Whatever the rationale for the delay, some of the health professionals, scientists and others who worked on the project have expressed keen disappointment, especially since they were once impressed by Dr. Satcher's willingness to take on such a touchy issue. In particular, participants remembered Dr. Satcher, who had just returned from an international AIDS conference in Durban, South Africa, delivering a heartfelt speech to the July retreat about the importance of the call to action.

Listening to the speech, Barbara Huberman, director of education and outreach for Advocates for Youth, wrote down two changes the surgeon

general said he hoped to see in five years: "All schools would have comprehensive sex education, and all people would be empowered, regardless of orientation, to be sexually responsible."

Jackie Admire-Borgelt, the assistant director of scientific activities at the American Academy of Family Physicians, recalled, "There was nothing in what he said that would have given me a clue that the report was dead."

Though reluctant to criticize Dr. Satcher, Ms. Admire-Borgelt said, "as we got closer and closer to the election, I could see the report hadn't come out, and I figured they had just decided to lay low."

Many participants said Dr. Satcher's staff had asked them to refer questions back to his office.

Dr. Linda Burn, a professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, said the July meeting did gather an array of advocates, including those urging teaching chastity until marriage, and an advocate for prostitutes.

At the time, Dr. Burn was excited, she said, adding, "I thought, something is really going to happen on this issue, and it's going to be framed in a positive way."

Now, she describes the meeting as "the most expensive endeavor I was ever involved in that had no outcome."

Ms. Admire-Borgelt said a call from the surgeon general was important, particularly given how politically charged the issue of sex education has been. In a recent survey by the Alan Guttmacher Institute, which receives financing from Planned Parenthood, about 23 percent of teachers said they taught abstinence as the only way to avoid pregnancy and venereal diseases, up from 2 percent in 1988.

Though other surveys have shown 9 out of 10 parents favoring comprehensive sex education in schools, the rise of abstinence-only programs reflects the local power exerted by groups on the religious right, backed by Congressional conservatives. The federal government, with state and local matching funds, is spending nearly \$500 million over five years on abstinence programs, though bodies like the National Academy of Sciences, the American Medical Association and the National Institutes of Health have criticized them for lacking proof that they work.

A stand from the surgeon general, they said, would review the research linking access to information about protection with behaviors that reduce risk. It would provide neutral, authoritative support for frank discussions about sex and for improving access to contraception.

In a New York City walk-in clinic, for example, there will be advice about condoms and other sexual precautions, Ms. Admire-Borgelt said. "But in small-town America, because you know these people, you go to school with them, see them in church, you do things differently. A surgeon general's recommendation gives you permission to address the topic."