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BREAK

Updated 2
• Cheney Pacema
• Doctor G Wife
• Patients' Vote

SEARCH

June 29, 2001

DAILY

- Front Page
- Nation/Politics
- World
- Commentary
- Opinion/Editorial
- Metropolitan
- Sports
- Business
- Technology
- Entertainment
- Culture
- Weather

WEEKLY

- Business Times
- Family Times
- Auto Weekend
- Home Guide
- Arts
- Access Magazine
- Nat'l Weekly Edition

MARKETPLACE

- Classifieds
- Tourist Guide
- Int'l Special Reports
- Advertiser Index

Satcher issues warning on American sexuality

By Julia Duin
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Surgeon General David Satcher released a much-delayed "call to action" on sexuality yesterday, informing Americans the country must address its high rates of sexually transmitted diseases, abortion, rapes, HIV infections and child sexual abuse.

However, he riled conservatives by insisting homosexuality is unchangeable and that his office found no evidence that abstinence-only programs are effective.

The report had been drafted in September by a committee, then got delayed once the more conservative Bush administration took office in January. What has emerged months later is a dire portrait of American sexual health that includes 12 million Americans infected by sexually transmitted diseases each year, including 40,000 new HIV infections. Forty-five million people -- one out of every six Americans -- have genital herpes.

More than 100,000 children are sexually abused each year and the annual yield of 1.4 million abortions affects one out of every four pregnancies. Nearly half of all pregnancies, he said, are unwanted.

He called on Americans to deal with "this serious public health challenge" but to respect "the diversity of sexual values within any community." Saying there is "no valid scientific evidence" that sexual orientation can be changed, he criticized a culture that "often stigmatizes homosexual behavior, identity and relationships."

Religious affiliation does not greatly affect sexual behavior, he said, but one's religious commitment does. A teen-ager's attendance at religious services means a greater

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likelihood of abstinence, he said, yet at the same time it meant less use of contraception among girls and more use among boys.

There is not enough research available as to whether abstinence-only programs work, Dr. Satcher said, and he questioned their value for teens who have already begun to have sex.

Americans can engage in a "mature and thoughtful discussion about sexuality," he said, and that, "given the diversity of attitudes, beliefs, values and opinions, finding common ground might not be easy, but it is attainable."

However, some groups disagreed on what constitutes common ground.

The Austin, Texas-based Medical Institute for Sexual Health faulted Dr. Satcher for not being more thorough.

"The greatest failure of this report is that it does not address the primary problem -- multiple sexual partners," said Dr. Joe S. McIlhane Jr., president of the Medical Institute. "The biggest risk for an individual becoming infected with a sexually transmitted disease, regardless of contraceptive use, is the number of sexual partners they have during their lifetime. The more sexual partners, the more risk of disease."

The Traditional Values Coalition (TVC) also questioned Dr. Satcher's claim that homosexuality is unchangeable and that there is no data to show that abstinence education works.

"According to Satcher, marriage is almost an afterthought," TVC Executive Director Andrea Lafferty said. "What children in high-risk areas really need to hear is that it is marriage that works -- not a set of monogamous relationships."

Dr. Satcher's report encourages abstinence from sex until one is involved in a "committed and mutually monogamous relationship." Federal abstinence programs suggest people wait until marriage before engaging in intercourse.

"Although Dr. Satcher emphasizes abstinence, he encourages people to wait until they find the right person instead of a lifelong marriage partner," said Heather Cirimo of the Family Research Council. "Marriage is the best protection against sexually transmitted diseases and out-of-wedlock pregnancies."

◀ [Back to Nation/Politics](#)

