

The Washington Post

FRIDAY, JUNE 29, 2001

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Surgeon General Urges Thorough Sex Education

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Surgeon General David Satcher yesterday urged parents and teachers to provide children with a thorough sex education that promotes abstinence but also permits distribution of contraception in schools.

In a comprehensive report on educating children about sexuality, Satcher also asserts that homosexuality is not a reversible lifestyle choice and that committed, "mutually monogamous" relationships are an acceptable alternative to marriage.

Despite the controversial nature of the topic—and intense pressure from all sides—Satcher said he was releasing the document because the

nation faced an array of grave public health problems related to sex, such as unintended pregnancies, anti-gay violence and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS.

"We have created an environment where there's almost a conspiracy of silence when it comes to sexuality," he said at a news conference. "It's talked about in the wrong places in the wrong ways."

The 30-page document from the surgeon general, who periodically issues authoritative reports on important public health matters, was released after two years of work. That included an exhaustive review of scientific literature, conferences and input from a wide range of sources, in-

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Satcher Urges Wide-Ranging Sex Education

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cluding religious leaders and people who would "qualify as commercial sex workers," Satcher said. "I listened to all of them."

During the report's preparation, Satcher came under intense pressure from conservative forces—including President Bush—lobbying for "abstinence-only" programs and liberal groups that pushed for an endorsement of explicit, detailed, safe-sex information.

Satcher withheld the report during the Monica S. Lewinsky scandal for fear it would feed anti-Clinton sentiment, said a department source. However, Satcher spokesman Damon Thompson denied that. When George W. Bush won the White House, some activists feared Satcher would be forced to water down his views.

Despite his soothing tone and diplomatic rhetoric, Satcher ultimately issued a candid assessment of sex in America, complete with his own delineation of the risks and rewards. But the "Call to Action to Promote Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual Behavior" did not appear to achieve his goal of "common ground."

The Bush administration distanced itself from the report. Spokesman Ari Fleischer took pains to note that Satcher was appointed by President Bill Clinton and that the report was "commissioned by the previous administration." Satcher's appointment does not expire until 2002.

"In an attempt to please everyone, I'm not sure he will please anybody," said Heather Cirno, a spokeswoman for the Family Research Council, a conservative group. She credited Satcher with putting abstinence back on the agenda but was disappointed the highest-ranking doctor in the country did not stress the failings of most forms of contraception.

Educators need to "tell the whole truth about condoms and so-called safe sex," she said.

Liberal activists praised Satcher for his tolerance of different sexual behaviors and emphasis on a wide range of educational approaches.

Satcher said he endorsed the distribution of condoms and other forms of contraception in the community because there is insufficient scientific data to conclude that "abstinence-only" education works.

Nevertheless, the report repeatedly endorsed abstinence until a person becomes involved in a stable monogamous relationship. But it did not limit that relationship to marriage because "marriage is not perfect," Satcher said.

Satcher called for tolerance of homosexuality, noting that "to date, there is no evidence that sexual orientation can be changed."

"We're certainly not trying to get anyone in any religious group to change their views," he said. "We're just saying these are people, these are human beings."

Several conservative groups complained that although Satcher was quick to preach tolerance for homosexuality, he did not focus enough on the virtues of marriage.

"According to Satcher, marriage is almost an afterthought," said Andrea Lafferty, head of the Traditional Values Coalition. "What children in high-risk areas really need to hear is that it is marriage that works—not a set of monogamous relationships."

Although there is no substitute for abstinence or good parenting, Satcher said, it would be unrealistic to expect those to solve every problem, making comprehensive sex education necessary.

"Schools must be the great equalizers in assuring that all children have a basic understanding of essential sexual health matters," he said. "We can't leave children floating in the wind; children must have access to the information they need."