Portrait: Dr. C. Everett Koop

Warning: The Surgeon General Is a Man of Strong Convictions

Dr. Koop is here . . . Dr. Koop is here . . . Dr. Koop is in O.R." No Orwellian monotone this. The voice announcing the arrival is alive with excitement. It belongs to a young nurse, the first person to spot the bearded pediatric surgeon as he steps off the elevator.

As Koop approaches, smiling broadly at the booming P.A. greeting, she runs the length of the small reception area to throw her arms around the big doctor, hugging and kissing him like a long-lost daddy. In an instant, she is joined by a half dozen other young nurses who also greet Koop with squeals and kisses.

It has been just about a year since Koop left this place to join the Reagan administration as U.S. Surgeon General, but at Children's Hospital in Philadelphia—and especially here in the C. Everett Koop Surgical Center—he is still as close to being a god as anyone ever comes.

After Koop finally frees himself from his hero's welcome, he takes a companion on a tour of the hospital's neonatal intensive care unit. Years before, in the old Children's Hospital on the other side of Philadelphia, Koop had envisioned just such a total care facility for sick infants. The futuristic medical complex that he now surveys—all green blips, hypersensitive monitors, miniaturized computer terminals and gleaming stainless steel incubators—is his living monument to that dream.

Koop peers through a thick glass wall at a roomful of tiny premature patients. "These little ones demand constant care," he says. "We set this up so there would be one nurse for every one and a half patients. You can't leave them alone for a minute. That's total life support in there. . . . See that little guy over there? I bet he doesn't even weigh three pounds. I've had to open the chests of smaller babies than him."

On the way out Koop stops in front of a large, empty operating room. "This," he says almost in a whisper, "is the room where we separated the Siamese twins." Koop, in fact, has successfully separated Siamese twins three times, believed to be a medical record. In addition, he has perfected scores of new surgical and diagnostic techniques, many of which are SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) today.

When Koop began practicing 35

By Mike Mallowe Photographs by Leroy Woodson Jr.

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…s ago, he was only the sixth man …the U.S. to devote his entire surgical practice to pediatrics. (Today the field numbers about 500.) At that time many operations on newborns carried with them a 95 percent mortality rate. By the time he left Children's Hospital, Koop was among those who had helped reverse that to a 95 percent survival rate.

"The founders of pediatric surgery preceded his era," says Dr. John Templeton of Children's Hospital, "but Dr. Koop was that rare combination of everything you look for in a surgeon—gifted technician, skilled researcher, excellent clinician and able administrator."

Is this, then, the "monster" whose nomination as Surgeon General was so bitterly assailed by assorted feminists, freedom-of-choicers, liberal legislators and editorial writers? Indeed it is. But if Koop is a pussycat around preemies and adoring nurses, don't be misled: Charles Everett Koop is a tough old pro, a broad-shouldered oak of a man with a stevedore's grip and an unbending will. He has been called stuffy, pompous, egotistical (even for a surgeon)—and worse. His black rages in the face of medical incompetence are legendary. "I think I must scare people," he says gently. "I don't think people quite know what to do with me."

As far back as the presidential campaign of 1980, the Reagan team knew exactly what *it* wanted to do with Koop. As one of the nation's most outspoken antiabortion crusaders, Koop had just concluded a speech to a right-to-life group in Washington when Richard Schweiker—soon to be Reagan's Secretary of Health and Human Services—called him aside and asked if he would consider accepting the Surgeon General post.

Schweiker's offer couldn't have come at a better time, for soon Koop would be retiring as surgeon-in-chief of Children's Hospital. Still, he was hesitant.

"All I could think," Koop says, "was that if I took it, it would mean going to work for somebody else for the first time in my life." But he says that on election night, watching Reagan's lead grow on television, "I suddenly knew that I wanted to be a part of all that. I picked up the phone and made one call. Change my status, I told them, from 'available' to 'enthusiastically seeking.' "

Officially, the Surgeon General is the chief of the 7,000-strong Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service, as well as a power inside the very political Department of Health and Human Services. However, his (there has never been a female Surgeon General) real importance traditionally has been as the President's spokesman—ideally his conscience—articulating the nation's health care goals. No man who ever held the office brought to it the contentiousness, or the background, of Everett Koop.

Koop grew up in Brooklyn's Flatbush district, the descendant of early Dutch colonists. In his youth, a skiing accident that badly fractured a cervical vertebra and a brain hemorrhage suffered during a football scrimmage kept him laid up for more than a year and forced him "to get to know what it feels like to be a patient." He entered Dartmouth in 1933 at 16 and upon graduation enrolled at Cornell Medical College, where he met his wife, Elizabeth, then a Vassar student. Koop began his residency at the University of Pennsylvania Hospital early in World War II, never to abandon the love of pediatrics that he developed there.

But ever since his nomination as Surgeon General was first leaked to the press, Koop has been viewed more as symbol than physician. His position on abortion was the flash point: Koop viscerally, and passionately, opposes it. "One Saturday in 1976," he recalls, "I had operated on three newborns. Around five that afternoon, I was sitting with my residents trying to unwind. We'd just taken three premature babies, all of whom had something incompatible with life, corrected it and given them a seventy-year life expectancy. We weren't smug, but we felt—we knew—that this is what we were put here for. Then all of a sudden I realized that those three babies together didn't weigh ten pounds. Yet infants like them, *with nothing wrong with them physically*, were being aborted all over the city that same day.

"I went home and wrote *The Right To Live; The Right To Die* in a day. After that, I could never turn back. When we have one and a half million abortions a year, there's a cheapening of life. That makes it easy to move on to the next classification of citizens who might not be seen as having a life worth living, and that's the elderly. That's three groups who have no advocate—the unborn, the newborn and the aged. But believe me, as Surgeon General, I intend to give them an advocate."

As an antiabortion missionary, Koop created a chilling multimedia crusade called *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* The program, which he took to 20 cities in 1979, offered moral and medical alternatives to abortion, which was depicted as carnage. Koop called the widely used amniocentesis test, for detecting abnormal fetuses, a "search and destroy mission." He also made pronouncements like this: "I can see prophetically a progression of thinking in this country from liberalized abortion to infanticide to passive euthanasia to active euthanasia, indeed to the very beginnings of the political climate that led to Auschwitz, Dachau and Belsen."

Not surprisingly, once tapped for the Surgeon General job, he became a prime target of freedom-of-choice leaders. He was denounced as an intolerant, sanctimonious medical Calvinist who would brand homosexuals and even ERA proponents with the same white-hot poker he applied to women seeking abortions. Edward Kennedy charged that Koop had "cruel, outdated and patronizing stereotypes" of women. "Dr. Koop scares me," said California Representative Henry A. Waxman, who helped stall Koop's congressional confirmation until last November. "All those with whom he disagrees he characterizes as antifamily."

"When you've got absolutes that you feel are God-given," counters Koop, a steadfast Christian fundamentalist, "you don't have much room for compromise on right or wrong. That's one of the reasons I irritate people."

At 65, it was said that he was too old for the job (indeed, the Reagan administration had to push through a law enabling Koop, at that age, to assume the post). He was also accused of lacking the necessary background in public health administration. "When you do innovative procedures that make anesthesia safe for babies," thunders Koop in reply, "it's a contribution to public health. When you make surgical procedures safe for children, and operations that you do are copied all over the country, I think *that's* public health."

Officially confirmed as Surgeon General by a 68-24 Senate vote last November, and sworn in this January, the administration's most visible antiabortion symbol is ready to move on to other matters. "I've said all that I have to say and written all that I have to write on that issue," he explains. "There are other, bigger things that I should turn my attention to as Surgeon General: where this country is and where it's going in health care."

Sometimes, though, Koop talks earnestly about resuming surgery. It is obvious how much he misses those early days in the operating room. "It was almost like we were beginning to invent the wheel," he says wistfully. "Everything you did then was brand-new; it was such an exciting time. . . .

"The challenge," he says, "is to do a routine operation that you've done over and over again, without a single wasted motion. To go in with an experienced nurse who knows me; to put out my hand, get the right instrument without ever looking up; do this; do that; finish the operation. Nothing wasted—that's pleasure. That's total pleasure." And it's the kind of pleasure that Dr. Koop has yet to find within the bureaucratic confines of Washington, D.C. ♠