

Koop urges early sex education to fight AIDS

By Joyce Price
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Surgeon General C. Everett Koop yesterday said AIDS education must start at the lowest school grade possible and he suggested that third- and fourth-graders could be taught how to avoid the deadly disease.

Pointing out that more than 70 percent of the nation's 26,500 reported AIDS cases have resulted from homosexual relations, Dr. Koop said, "We need teachers to teach sex, including homosexuality."

He said it would not be necessary to teach children as young as 8 or 9 about homosexuality, as they would not likely be experimenting sexually at that time. But, Dr. Koop said, teenagers are sexually active and "tend to take risks because they think they are immortal. I would hope that teenagers would have so much informa-

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tion and education [about the risks involved in some forms of sexuality] that they wouldn't experiment."

As for children in the primary grades being taught about AIDS — the acquired immune deficiency syndrome — as a sexually transmitted disease, Dr. Koop said he has seen material taught to third-graders in some school districts that is "very explicit" sexually. "But it only addresses homosexuality," he said. "In the third grade, you can tell kids that sex leads to other things — besides babies. You can tell them it

can lead to diseases such as AIDS."

Dr. Koop said intensified educational efforts — involving parents and physicians — are needed to help control the spread of acquired immune deficiency syndrome, which has claimed nearly 18,000 lives. "That figure is expected to increase twelvefold by the end of 1991 — only five years from now," he said.

Dr. Koop's comments, which came as part of a report to Americans on the AIDS epidemic, a report requested in February by President Reagan, were greeted

with some reservations by the secretary of the Department of Education and many national and local educational groups.

"Like most Americans, I believe children should be taught about the physical, psychological and moral consequences of sexual activity," said William Bennett, secretary of education. "A frank description of the danger of AIDS should certainly be part of this teaching. But before teaching a specific curriculum, schools should get parental involvement and approval."

The Rev. Jerry Falwell endorsed Dr. Koop's report. "We agree wholeheartedly, in the long-range analysis, that education — both in the home and in the schools — will be the solution to a problem like this," he said.

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"Third and fourth grades may be too early to be teaching this kind of thing. But if these other things [information about heterosexuality] are being taught that early, information about the relationship between AIDS and homosexuality should also be taught," Mr. Falwell said.

Dr. Koop's remarks sparked concern — and, in some cases, outrage — from several organizations. "I find his proposals appalling," said Robert Bartleson, executive director of United Families of America, a group opposed to sex education in schools. "It's ridiculous for anyone to maintain that AIDS is transmitted out of ignorance."

Mr. Bartleson said he also believes it could be harmful to teach adolescents or preadolescents about homosexuality. "I have a concern that in teaching homosexual sex, you'll see a rise in homosexual sex in teen-agers," he said.

George Tryfiates, director of government relations for the Committee to Protect the Family in Falls Church, said: "The cornerstone of our organization is that kids need to be taught to say no to sex outside of marriage. So if kids are going to be taught about homosexuality, as the surgeon general suggests, they need to know it's wrong since it does not lead to marriage. They should be taught the importance of trying to overcome homosexual tendencies and not give in to them."

American Federation of Teachers spokeswoman Jean Whitman said her organization "supports strong general education about the hazards of AIDS, but it is an issue schools should be handling individually. Schools are governed by local governments and mores. And where local school boards are adamantly opposed to sex education, I wouldn't see our group encouraging this kind of program there."

"We say education is an important part of combatting this ugly problem. But we have no formal program for teaching AIDS nor have we come up with any specifics as to how or when it should be taught," said Howard Carroll, spokesman for the National Education Association. "Any such program needs to be tied in with the entire community, so parents, health authorities and the community at large are involved."

In his remarks, Dr. Koop said he believes all those sectors should be involved in educating the public — and children — about AIDS.

Public school officials in the District, Maryland and Virginia said they now provide information about

Surgeon General C. Everett Koop gives reporters at a press conference yesterday service announcement on AIDS. Dr. Koop also urged that sex education begin

AIDS as part of sex education programs.

Spokeswoman Janis Cromer said sex education in District schools begins in the fourth grade. But she said instruction concerning homosexuality and bisexuality is delayed until students reach junior and senior high school.

Jean Bentley, who is in charge of family life programs in Virginia schools, said AIDS instruction starts in the seventh grade in the state system. "I'm not sure it belongs in the third or fourth grades," she said. "Sometimes, telling children that young about these kinds of problems amounts to scare tactics, which don't help."

Russell Henke, health education specialist for Maryland public schools, said AIDS education also begins in the seventh grade in Maryland. "Possibly we may change our current guidelines slightly and move that starting grade down from the seventh to the sixth," he said.

Mr. Henke said he does not see the need to start such education in the

third or fourth grades. "Children at that age can understand the concept of the disease," he said. "But as far as going into details about how it's transmitted, it's just too early."

Dr. Koop said Dr. Robert Windom, an assistant secretary for Public Health Service in the Department of Health and Human Services, soon will release information about a "multifaceted AIDS education program he has developed."

Dr. Koop said his goal will be to reach everyone in the United States with his AIDS message and that he is running public service announcements on television, urging people to send for a copy of his AIDS report.

Concerted education efforts must be directed at blacks and Hispanics, Dr. Koop said. He noted that blacks represent 12 percent of the U.S. population but account for 25 percent of all AIDS cases, and that Hispanics are 6 percent of the population, but represent 12 percent of all AIDS patients. He said that 80 percent of all children with AIDS are black or His-

panic.

Dr. Koop said the AIDS education effort should be a far-reaching program — available in all languages. For those who can't read, the AIDS message should be presented in such forms as pictures in comic books, he said.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control, 73 percent of the AIDS cases are homosexual men, 17 percent are intravenous drug users, 2 percent are those who received transfusions of infected blood, 1 percent are hemophiliacs, 1 percent are infants born to infected mothers, and 4 percent are heterosexuals, many from Haiti or east Africa, who have had intimate contact with someone with AIDS or in the group most at risk of contracting