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STATEMENT

BY

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AND

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TO THE ATTORNEY GENERAL'S COMMISSION ON PORNOGRAPHY

WASHINGTON, D.C.

JUNE 20, 1985

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMISSION:

MY NAME IS C. EVERETT KOOP. I HAVE BEEN A PRACTICING PHYSICIAN FOR 44 YEARS. SINCE NOVEMBER 1981, HOWEVER, I HAVE BEEN THE SURGEON GENERAL OF THE U.S. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE.

I AM APPEARING THIS MORNING BEFORE THIS COMMISSION IN MY OFFICIAL CAPACITY AS SURGEON GENERAL. BUT LET ME EMPHASIZE THAT MY APPEARANCE HERE MEANS A GOOD DEAL MORE TO ME AND TO THE PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE THAN JUST ANOTHER OFFICIAL DUTY. I CONSIDER THIS TO BE AN ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE WITH THE DISTINGUISHED MEMBERS OF THIS COMMISSION -- AND WITH THE PUBLIC AT LARGE -- SOME OF OUR CONCERNS REGARDING THE POTENTIAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PORNOGRAPHY AND THE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH OF OUR CITIZENS AND OF OUR SOCIETY IN GENERAL.

FIRST, MR. CHAIRMAN, LET ME SAY THAT WE ARE NOT OPERATING IN THE DARK IN THIS MATTER, AS MAY HAVE BEEN THE CASE A DECADE OR TWO AGO. RESEARCHERS IN THE BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES HAVE BEEN GENERATING A PROFESSIONALLY RESPECTABLE LITERATURE ON MANY ASPECTS OF PORNOGRAPHY IN THE YEARS SINCE THE REPORT OF THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON OBSCENITY AND PORNOGRAPHY APPEARED IN 1970.

YOU WILL RECALL, MR. CHAIRMAN, THAT THE MEMBERS OF THAT COMMISSION SAID THAT THEY'D SEEN "NO EVIDENCE THAT EXPOSURE TO OR USE OF EXPLICIT SEXUAL MATERIALS PLAYS A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN THE CAUSATION OF SOCIAL AND INDIVIDUAL HARMS, SUCH AS CRIME, DELINQUENCY, SEXUAL OR NONSEXUAL DEVIANCY, OR SEVERE EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCE."

THEIR CONCLUSION SATISFIED SOME PEOPLE BUT UPSET MANY OTHERS. BUT I THINK WE SHOULD SAY THAT THE 1970 REPORT WAS BASED UPON A VERY LIMITED UNIVERSE OF SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE AND EXPERIENCE REGARDING PORNOGRAPHY. IN THAT RESPECT, THE SOMEWHAT EQUIVOCAL JUDGMENT OF THE COMMISSION MAY HAVE BEEN AN ACCURATE REFLECTION OF THE EQUIVOCAL NATURE OF THE STATE OF OUR KNOWLEDGE AT THAT TIME.

BUT 15 YEARS HAVE GONE BY AND WE ARE NOW QUITE A BIT MORE KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT PORNOGRAPHY AND ITS POTENTIAL EFFECTS UPON HEALTH. AND DURING THOSE INTERVENING YEARS SOCIETY HAS ALSO BECOME MUCH MORE CONCERNED ABOUT THE WAY PORNOGRAPHY HAS BEGUN TO INVADE BOTH OUR PUBLIC AND OUR PRIVATE LIVES.

AT ONE TIME, THE PUBLIC'S CONCERN WAS FOCUSED ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY UPON BOOK STORES AND MOVIE THEATERS THAT SPECIALIZED IN PORNOGRAPHY. BUT TODAY'S HUCKSTERS OF PORNOGRAPHY HAVE INVADED CABLE TELEVISION, THE WORLD OF POPULAR MUSIC, TELEPHONE COMMUNICATIONS, AND THE WHOLE NEW FIELD OF HOME VIDEO RECORDERS. THROUGH THESE NEW TECHNOLOGIES THEY'VE EXPANDED THEIR MARKETS OF SLEAZE AND TRASH.

AS A CITIZEN AND AS YOUR SURGEON GENERAL, I SHARE THE SAME ANXIETIES AS THE REST OF MY COUNTRYMEN AND, LIKE YOURSELVES AND LIKE THE ATTORNEY GENERAL, I ALSO WANT TO DO WHAT I CAN TO HELP ALLEVIATE OUR FEARS AND MISGIVINGS ABOUT THE PRESENCE OF PORNOGRAPHY IN AMERICAN LIFE.

I MUST SAY THAT, HOWEVER, WITH THE GREATEST OF CAUTION, THE MEMBERS OF THIS COMMISSION ARE AWARE, I AM SURE, OF THE WAY IN WHICH OUR COUNTRY TENDS TO "MEDICALIZE" ALL OUR WORST SOCIAL PROBLEMS. AS A RESULT, THE PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNITY HAS BEEN HANDED SUCH ISSUES AS DIVORCE, DRUNK DRIVING, AND TEEN-AGE PREGNANCY AND IT'S BEEN ASKED TO "DO SOMETHING" ABOUT THEM.

I THINK PUBLIC HEALTH PEOPLE ARE DOING THE BEST THEY CAN WITH THE BROAD AGENDA OF CONCERNS THEY'VE BEEN GIVEN, EVEN THOUGH SOME OF THE PROBLEMS ARE NOT PARTICULARLY -- OR EVEN PECULIARLY -- HEALTH OR MEDICAL PROBLEMS.

BUT, AS WE'VE SEEN HAPPEN WITH DRUNK DRIVING, FOR EXAMPLE, AND WITH ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION, SOCIETY IS ABLE TO GENERATE REAL SOLUTIONS ONLY WHEN ALL THE AFFECTED INTEREST GROUPS -- INCLUDING PUBLIC HEALTH -- SHARE A SENSE OF PROPRIETORSHIP FOR THOSE PROBLEMS. THAT'S THE POINT AT WHICH A SOCIAL PROBLEM IS NO LONGER YOURS OR YOURS OR YOURS...IT HAS BECOMES OURS.

THIS IS A PLEA, THEREFORE, THAT WE NOT IDENTIFY PORNOGRAPHY AS BEING ESSENTIALLY OR PRIMARILY A PROBLEM AFFECTING THE PUBLIC HEALTH. PORNOGRAPHY IS, RATHER, A GENERAL SOCIAL PROBLEM IN WHICH PUBLIC HEALTH CAN IDENTIFY A VITAL YET A PARTICULAR INTEREST AND FOR WHICH PUBLIC HEALTH MAY BE ABLE TO OFFER SOME SPECIFIC RELIEF.

IF THAT SOUNDS TOO THEORETICAL, I DON'T MEAN IT TO BE SO. I BELIEVE WE HAVE ENOUGH EVIDENCE TO IMPLICATE PORNOGRAPHY AS A SERIOUS CONTRIBUTING FACTOR TO CERTAIN DISORDERS OF HUMAN HEALTH AND AS A KIND OF "ACCESSORY" TO CERTAIN ANTI-SOCIAL ACTIONS THAT PRODUCE GRAVE AND PROFOUNDLY HARMFUL OUTCOMES.

THIS SEEMS TO BE ESPECIALLY CLEAR IN TWO AREAS:

* FIRST, THERE IS MOUNTING EVIDENCE THAT SEXUALLY VIOLENT MATERIAL DOES HAVE A NEGATIVE EFFECT ON ATTITUDES. FOR EXAMPLE, SUCH MATERIAL CLEARLY AND VICIOUSLY DEGRADES WOMEN. MEN WHO SEE OR READ SUCH MATERIAL OVER A PERIOD OF TIME TEND TO HAVE A HIGHER DEGREE OF TOLERANCE FOR SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND ACTS OF SEXUAL DEGRADATION. AND WE SUSPECT THAT FOR MEN WHO ARE EVEN SLIGHTLY PREDISPOSED TO SUCH BEHAVIOR, THIS MATERIAL MAY PROVIDE THE IMPETUS THAT PROPELS THEM FROM THE UNREAL WORLD OF FANTASY TO THE REAL WORLD OF OVERT ACTION.

IT'S IMPORTANT TO KNOW HOW THAT HAPPENS, IN ORDER TO DEVELOP EFFECTIVE WAYS TO INTERVENE AND, THUS, PREVENT SUCH ACTION FROM TAKING PLACE.

* A SECOND AREA INVOLVES CHILDREN, BOTH THE USE OF CHILDREN AS SUBJECTS IN PORNOGRAPHY AND THE USE OF SUCH CHILD PORNOGRAPHY TO AROUSE CHILDREN AND ADULTS TO ENGAGE IN ILLICIT AND OFTEN VIOLENT SEXUAL ACTS. THIS IS, UNFORTUNATELY, NOT A NEW PROBLEM FOR MANKIND. HOWEVER, WE ARE JUST NOW BECOMING ACUTELY AWARE OF THE DEVASTATING LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF THESE KINDS OF PORNOGRAPHY MAY HAVE UPON BOTH THE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH OF THE VICTIMIZED CHILDREN. WE ALSO KNOW THAT MANY CHILDREN EXPLOITED BY THE PORNOGRAPHER SOON BECOME VICTIMS OF THE EVEN MORE FRIGHTENING WORLD OF CHILD PROSTITUTION.

THERE IS ALSO A GROWING BODY OF EVIDENCE THAT POINTS TO THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS KIND OF PORNOGRAPHIC STIMULUS FOR THE ADULT WHO THEN SEXUALLY ABUSES CHILDREN. IN MY TERMS, I CALL CHILD PORNOGRAPHY IN SUCH CASES AN "ACCESSORY" TO THE CRIME OF CHILD ABUSE.

THIS IS AN AREA THAT HAS BEEN RECEIVING MORE AND MORE ATTENTION SINCE THE MID-1970s. BUT WHILE THE PUBLIC'S DISGUST AND ANGER HAS BEEN TURNED INTO NEW AND HARsher FEDERAL AND STATE LAW, THE PUBLIC HEALTH RESEARCH COMMUNITY HAS LAGGED BEHIND IN DEVELOPING THE KIND OF DATA THAT PUBLIC AUTHORITIES NEED TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF CHILD PORNOGRAPHY, AS WELL AS TO HELP RECLAIM CHILDREN WHO HAVE BEEN VICTIMIZED BY PORNOGRAPHERS.

THERE IS A BITTER IRONY HERE, HOWEVER: WE KNOW THAT PROFESSIONALS ENGAGING IN BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH HAVE NOT BEEN ACTIVE IN CHILD PORNOGRAPHY BECAUSE OF THEIR RESPECT FOR CERTAIN OBVIOUS ETHICAL RESTRAINTS -- THE VERY SAME ETHICAL RESTRAINTS THAT THE PORNOGRAPHER BRAZENLY VIOLATES.

BUT FOR WHATEVER REASON, WE'VE BEEN GIVING PORNOGRAPHY A LOW PRIORITY IN THE OVERALL SCHEME OF PUBLIC HEALTH CONCERNS. BUT AT THIS STAGE OF OUR UNDERSTANDING, TO IGNORE THE EVIDENCE WOULD BE TO MAKE A CONSCIOUS DECISION NOT TO SEE PORNOGRAPHY AS A CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER TO AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH. AND IT OBVIOUSLY IS.

HENCE, MANY PROFESSIONALS IN PUBLIC HEALTH ARE NOW BEGINNING TO LOOK UPON PORNOGRAPHY WITH THE SAME DEGREE OF SERIOUS STUDY THAT THEY'VE GIVEN EVERY OTHER MANIFESTATION OF MAJOR SOCIAL STRESS AND DISORDER. I'M GREATLY ENCOURAGED BY THAT. THE PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNITY, AFTER ALL, HAS EMPLOYED THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD TO UNDERSTAND AND VANQUISH SUCH PHENOMENA AS "LEGIONNAIRE'S DISEASE" AND "TOXIC SHOCK SYNDROME." GOOD SCIENCE HAS BEEN OUR BEST WEAPON IN THOSE AND MANY OTHER DIFFICULT CASES.

AND GOOD SCIENCE IS ALSO THE KEY TO OUR ULTIMATE VICTORY OVER CIGARETTE SMOKING, WHICH, AS YOU KNOW, IS THE MAJOR CONTRIBUTOR TO THE THREE LEADING KILLERS OF OUR PEOPLE: CANCER, STROKE, AND HEART DISEASE.

WHILE PEOPLE OFTEN SPEAK OF PORNOGRAPHY AS A "DISEASE" OF OUR SOCIETY, I'M AFRAID THAT'S MORE POETRY THAN SCIENCE. PORNOGRAPHY DOES NOT, OF COURSE, LITERALLY ACT LIKE A BACTERIUM OR A VIRUS. AS MUCH AS WE MIGHT WISH FOR IT, WE WILL NEVER COME UP WITH A VACCINE OR A MEDICATION THAT WILL CURE ANYONE OF ENGAGING IN PORNOGRAPHY. IN THAT SENSE, YOU MIGHT SAY THAT OUR TASK IS ALL THE MORE DIFFICULT, SINCE THERE IS NO CLEAR END-POINT AT WHICH WE MIGHT UNFURL THE BANNER OF "SUCCESS."

BUT THAT SHOULD NOT BE A REASON -- OR AN EXCUSE -- FOR INDECISION OR INACTIVITY. WE MAY NOT KNOW EVERYTHING WE'D LIKE TO KNOW OR NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PORNOGRAPHY AND PUBLIC HEALTH. NEVERTHELESS, WE KNOW ENOUGH TO IDENTIFY THE DIRECTION IN WHICH WE OUGHT TO BE GOING IN THIS ISSUE.

AND I FEEL CONFIDENT THAT THE MEDICAL AND PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNITIES ARE PREPARED TO MOVE AHEAD IN THAT FRAME OF MIND, ALSO. I BASE THAT FEELING ON MY EXPERIENCE OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS WITH A SIMILAR ISSUE AFFECTING THE PUBLIC HEALTH: INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE.

THREE YEARS AGO I BEGAN TO VOICE MY CONCERN OVER THE LEVEL OF VIOLENCE IN AMERICAN SOCIETY. I SAID THAT ACTS OF ASSAULT, RAPE, MARITAL RAPE, CHILD ABUSE, CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE, AND HOMICIDE ARE OCCURRING IN NUMBERS FAR BEYOND WHAT WE MIGHT EXPECT EVEN IN A BIG COUNTRY LIKE OURS WITH ITS MINORITY OF CLINICALLY DISTURBED MEN AND WOMEN.

THE OUTCOMES OF SUCH VIOLENCE ARE CATASTROPHIC NOT JUST FOR ITS VICTIMS BUT FOR THE COUNTRY AT LARGE. WE ARE SPENDING YEARS IN TIME AND MILLIONS IN DOLLARS TRYING TO PIECE BACK TOGETHER AGAIN THE BODIES AND MINDS AND LIVES OF VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE.

FOR THE PAST 3 YEARS I'VE BEEN DELIVERING THIS MESSAGE TO PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS, TO THE MEDIA -- IN PARTICULAR THE LEADERSHIP OF THE THREE MAJOR NETWORKS -- AND TO CONCERNED CITIZENS' GROUPS.

THIS YEAR THE TIME SEEMS TO BE RIPE FOR PEOPLE IN MEDICINE AND PUBLIC HEALTH TO FOCUS ON WAYS TO IMPROVE THE DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT OF VICTIMS AND ALSO TO PREVENT VIOLENCE FROM HAPPENING IN THE FIRST PLACE. WITH THAT GOAL IN MIND, I'VE ISSUED INVITATIONS TO A "SURGEON GENERAL'S WORKSHOP ON VIOLENCE AND PUBLIC HEALTH" TO BE HELD THIS OCTOBER IN LEESBURG, VIRGINIA. THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE IS AN ACTIVE CO-SPONSOR OF THE WORKSHOP, I AM PLEASED TO REPORT.

AS OF TODAY, NEARLY 150 LEADING PHYSICIANS, NURSES, EMERGENCY MEDICINE SPECIALISTS, VICTIMS ADVOCATES, PSYCHOLOGISTS, AND MANY OTHERS HAVE QUICKLY ACCEPTED MY CHALLENGE AND PLAN TO TAKE PART IN THAT WORKSHOP.

AND FROM THE LITTLE NOTES THAT MANY HAVE ATTACHED TO THEIR RESPONSE FORMS, IT SEEMS CLEAR ENOUGH THAT THESE COLLEAGUES IN MEDICINE, NURSING, PUBLIC HEALTH, AND SOCIAL SERVICES CAN BE STRONG AND WILLING ALLIES OF THE GENERAL PUBLIC IN ANY SERIOUS EFFORT TO TURN BACK THE TIDES OF VIOLENCE.

WE WILL NOT BE DEALING WITH PORNOGRAPHY AS SUCH AT THE LEESBURG WORKSHOP. BUT I DON'T DOUBT THAT IT WILL COME UP IN OUR DISCUSSIONS OF THE CAUSES AND OUTCOMES OF ACTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND ADULTS.

AND I BELIEVE THAT, AS THE PUBLIC SHARES ITS GROWING UNEASINESS REGARDING PORNOGRAPHY, THE SAME KINDS OF PROFESSIONALS WHO WILL BE WITH US AT LEESBURG -- MAYBE MANY OF THE SAME INDIVIDUALS -- WILL STEP FORWARD, READY TO HELP.

WHAT IS IT THAT NEEDS TO BE DONE? I'D SAY THERE ARE 3 GENERAL TASKS TO BE ACCOMPLISHED:

FIRST, WE NEED TO SORT THROUGH THE THINGS WE'VE LEARNED OVER THE PAST 10 OR 15 YEARS ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PORNOGRAPHY AND PUBLIC HEALTH.

SECOND, WE NEED TO IDENTIFY THOSE AREAS IN WHICH WE HAVE A GOOD DEAL OF INFORMATION AND THOSE AREAS IN WHICH WE HAVE LITTLE OR NO INFORMATION AT ALL.

AND FINALLY, WE NEED TO WORK OUT A PUBLIC HEALTH STRATEGY FOR GATHERING THE IMPORTANT INFORMATION THAT WE LACK.

I BELIEVE SUCH AN EFFORT WOULD GO FAR TOWARD HELPING OUR PUBLIC OFFICIALS IN HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES, AND LAW ENFORCEMENT DO A MORE EFFECTIVE JOB...

DEALING WITH THE ISSUE OF PORNOGRAPHY...

DEALING WITH THE PURVEYORS OF PORNOGRAPHY...

AND DEALING WITH THOSE INDIVIDUALS FOR WHOM PORNOGRAPHY IS THE STIMULUS TO ANTI-SOCIAL AND VIOLENT ACTION.

IN OTHER WORDS, WHILE WE MAY NOT LEARN EVERYTHING ABOUT PORNOGRAPHY WITHIN THE NEXT FEW MONTHS OR EVEN WITHIN THE YEAR, I'M SURE WE CAN AT LEAST LEARN ENOUGH TO HELP SOCIETY ACT.

MR. CHAIRMAN, I WANT TO CONGRATULATE YOU AND THE MEMBERS AND STAFF OF THE COMMISSION ON PORNOGRAPHY FOR MOVING QUICKLY AND DECISIVELY TO CARRY OUT THE CHARGE GIVEN YOU BY ATTORNEY GENERAL MEESE. THE U.S. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE SHARES WITH EACH OF YOU THE SAME GRAVE CONCERN FOR THE WELL-BEING OF MILLIONS OF MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN, WHOSE PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL, AND MENTAL HEALTH IS PLACED AT RISK BY THE LOATHESOME MERCHANTS OF PORNOGRAPHY.

I WOULD FURTHER LIKE TO PLEDGE TO YOU THAT THE OFFICE OF THE SURGEON GENERAL AND THE U.S. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE ITSELF STANDS READY TO HELP YOU IN ANY WAY POSSIBLE.

AND NOW, IF YOU WISH, I WOULD BE PLEASED TO RESPOND TO YOUR QUESTIONS.

THANK YOU.

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