

Lecture December 14, 1988

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Address

By

C. Everett Koop, MD, ScD

Surgeon General

Of the

U.S. Public Health Service

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I opened by thanking people for attending. I reminded the audience they were chosen by a thoughtful, hardworking, interagency planning committee. Its members came from five Cabinet-level departments: Transportation, Justice, Education, Defense, and Health and Human Services. That's hardly a parochial group. We even had Congressman William S. Goodling with us – a dedicated Congressman and tireless leader for every major effort by the Congress to fight the scourge of drunk driving. The urgency of the issue was almost palpable. If one could see the many letters that come into my office from state and local officials from every area of the country, if they could read the cards, letters, and telegrams I received from surviving family member grieving over the loss of a loved one killed by a drunk driver, if they could understand the response we've already had to the Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse Initiative launched by Secretary Otis R Bowen last year and reinforced at a major meeting in San Diego this past October, it would be no surprise that the sentiment expressed by 99 United States Senators and an unanimous House of Representatives asked me to take on this issue and do whatever I could to bring it under control. I also played tribute to Senator Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island and Senator John W. Warner of Virginia, two gentlemen who co-sponsored that letter signed by them and 97 of their colleagues. And I thanked Congressman Goodling again and asked him to take credit for House Concurrent Resolution 276 in the recent 100th Congress.

Congress knows – and I certainly did – that the powers of the Surgeon General are carefully circumscribed. I do not allocate funds, or operate programs, or carry out any specific legislation, nor do I pretend that I do. What I do and do to the best of my ability is to use the power and authority of my office to heavily invest in public education. I inherited that power and authority when I assumed the office of the Surgeon General over 7 years ago. And the credit for that goes to my 12 predecessors, going back for more than a century. I hope that I might be remembered as having done something to further strengthen this office in the eyes of this nation.

In the matter of drunk driving, the Surgeon General's role is virtually nothing more—but certainly nothing less—than public education. By “the public”, I mean not only lay citizens but also my colleagues at all levels of government—federal, state and local—and my fellow citizens in the private sector, both in profit and non-profit activities. Hence, the Surgeon General's Workshop. The rest of the remarks I made were telling that audience what I expected of them and reminded them that the brief time I had been talking to them one of our citizens had been killed by a drunk driver. While they were grabbing a quick lunch at noontime 2 more were killed. And this evening, in the hour when you relax over dinner 3 more will be killed in the same way. I think that's worth talking about. By the time we meet tomorrow 65 Americans will have died on the highway in alcohol-related deaths.

I was blunt, I was specific, I was emotional, and in my mind all the time I was talking was the fact that, even as I spoke a federal judge was considering the appeal of the Wholesale Brewers and the Vintners of America to get an injunction to stop my Workshop from proceeding. Every word I said from there on is important enough not to be summarized.