Surgeon General’s Report on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

Date ★ October 1986
Place ★ Washington, D.C.
Type of Source ★ Government Document
Author ★ Dr. C. Everett Koop, Surgeon General
Context ★ AIDS was first diagnosed in 1981. Ignorance of the disease led to rumors that AIDS could be spread by handshakes, toilet seats, or sneezes. Conservative religious supporters of President Reagan felt that the disease was a punishment against homosexuals, drug users, and the sexually active. C. Everett Koop, himself a conservative Christian, felt that only realistic education would slow the epidemic. In an unprecedented move, Koop sent a pamphlet to every American household explaining the disease and how to prevent it.

This is a report from the Surgeon General of the U.S. Public Health Service to the people of the United States on AIDS. Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome is an epidemic that has already killed thousands of people, mostly young, productive Americans. In addition to illness, disability, and death, AIDS has brought fear to the hearts of most Americans—fear of the disease and fear of the unknown.

Introduction

In preparing this report, I [Dr. Koop] consulted with the best medical and scientific experts this country can offer. I met with leaders of organizations concerned with health, education, and other aspects of our society to gain their views of the problems associated with AIDS. The information in this report is current and timely.

This report was written personally by me to provide the necessary understanding of AIDS.

The vast majority of Americans are against illicit drugs. As a health officer I am opposed to the use of illicit drugs. As a practicing physician for more than forty years, I have seen the devastation that follows the use of illicit drugs—addiction, poor health, family disruption, emotional disturbances and death. I applaud the President’s initiative to rid this nation of the curse of illicit drug use and addiction. The success of his initiative is critical to the health of the American people and will also help reduce the number of persons exposed to the AIDS virus.

Some Americans have difficulties in dealing with the subjects of sex, sexual practices, and alternative lifestyles. Many Americans are opposed to homosexuality, promiscuity of any kind, and prostitution. This report must deal with all of these issues, but does so with the intent that information and education can change individual behavior, since this is the primary way to stop the epidemic of AIDS...
Education about AIDS should start in early elementary school and at home so that children can grow up knowing the behavior to avoid to protect themselves from exposure to the AIDS virus. The threat of AIDS can provide an opportunity for parents to instill in their children their own moral and ethical standards.

Those of us who are parents, educators and community leaders, indeed all adults, cannot disregard this responsibility to educate our young. The need is critical and the price of neglect is high. The lives of our young people depend on our fulfilling our responsibility.

AIDS is an infectious disease. It is contagious, but it cannot be spread in the same manner as a common cold or measles or chicken pox. It is contagious the same way that sexually transmitted diseases, such as syphilis and gonorrhea, are contagious. AIDS can also be spread through the sharing of intravenous drug needles and syringes used for injecting illicit drugs.

AIDS is not spread by common everyday contact but by sexual contact... Yet there is great misunderstanding resulting in unfounded fear that AIDS can be spread by casual non-sexual contact. The first cases of AIDS were reported in this country in 1981. We would know by now if AIDS were passed by casual, non-sexual contact.

At the beginning of the AIDS epidemic many Americans had little sympathy for people with AIDS. The feeling was that somehow people from certain groups “deserved” their illness. Let us put those feelings behind us. We are fighting a disease, not people. Those who are already afflicted are sick people and need our care as do all sick patients. This country must face this epidemic as a unified society. We must prevent the spread of AIDS while at the same time preserving our humanity and intimacy.

AIDS is a life-threatening disease and a major public health issue. Its impact on our society is and will continue to be devastating. By the end of 1991, an estimated 270,000 cases of AIDS will have occurred with 179,000 deaths within the decade since the disease was first recognized. In the year 1991, an estimated 145,000 patients with AIDS will need health and supportive services at a total cost of between $8 and $16 billion. However, AIDS is preventable. It can be controlled by changes in personal behavior. It is the responsibility of every citizen to be informed about AIDS and to exercise appropriate preventative measures. This report will tell you how.

The spread of AIDS can and must be stopped.

C. Everett Koop, M.D., Sc.D.
Surgeon General

[The body and summary of the report continues for 14 more pages, detailing the causes, symptoms, prevention methods, support service agencies, and what would not cause AIDS.]