

AIDS Action, HRC oppose Holsinger

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By Bob Roehr

AIDS Action and the Human Rights Campaign have become the first two national organizations to oppose the nomination of Dr. James W. Holsinger Jr. to be surgeon general of the United States. Other organizations have expressed concern and are sifting through the public record in order to shape their own position on the nomination.

It was also noted this week by Truth Wins Out, a group that debunks the religious right, that Holsinger helped found a church in Lexington, Kentucky that operates an "ex-gay" ministry.

Holsinger was nominated by President Bush last month. His nomination requires Senate confirmation.

"We are extremely disappointed with this nomination and we will be writing to Senators [Ted] Kennedy (D-Massachusetts) and [Mike] Enzi (R-Wyoming), the chairman and ranking member of the committee, opposing the nomination," said Ronald Johnson, deputy director of AIDS Action, in an exclusive interview on May 31.

"We feel this is another distressing signal and message that this administration, this president, does not either understand or take seriously the domestic epidemic. To appoint someone who has a track record of being anti-gay is just not acceptable," Johnson added. He pointed out that the HIV epidemic in the U.S. continues to disproportionately affect gay men.

Late Tuesday, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force also came out against Holsinger's nomination.

Former Surgeon Generals C. Everett Koop, David Thatcher, and Jocelyn Elders all played prominent roles in responding to HIV in earlier administrations. Johnson said the next surgeon general must continue that tradition. The position has been filled on an acting basis since last summer.

Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign, said, "Dr. Holsinger has a record that is unworthy of America's doctor," in a statement released June 4. "His writings suggest a scientific view rooted in anti-gay beliefs that are incompatible with the job of serving the medical health of all Americans. It is essential that America's top doctor value sound science over anti-gay ideology."

Holsinger's views on homosexuality are contained in an eight-page document, "Pathophysiology of Male Homosexuality," that he wrote from a medical perspective and submitted to the Committee to Study Homosexuality of the United Methodist Church in January 1991. He was a member of the committee at the time.

The document that is circulating among gay groups is believed to be authentic, though it has not been completely verified.

In it Holsinger explained, "I believe that we must seriously consider the scientific disciplines of anatomy (structure or morphology), physiology (function), pathology (abnormal anatomy), and

pathophysiology (abnormal function). Not to do so would simply fail to be true to our charge as a committee."

The arguments in the paper are typical of a right-wing view of homosexuality in that they virtually ignore lesbians; focus on sex only in the context of reproduction, with no thought of pleasure; and have a preoccupation with the anus, particularly with the arcane practice of fisting.

Holsinger recited all of the medical woes that may beset "homosexually active men," neglecting to mention that every single one of those conditions also occur in heterosexual men, albeit perhaps at different rates.

A month after submitting his report, he resigned from the committee, fearing that its final report would take a liberal line.

Nomination

Unlike most appointees who serve at the pleasure of the president, the surgeon general serves a fixed four-year term. President Bush nominated Holsinger, 68, on May 24, a Thursday afternoon prior to the long Memorial Day weekend that marks the unofficial start of the summer vacation season. That timing gimmick often is used to minimize media attention.

On paper he is eminently suitable for the position of chief public health officer: a medical degree from Duke University; a master's in hospital financial management from the University of South Carolina; a 25-year career with the Veterans Administration, rising to a senior management position; and subsequent work at the University of Kentucky and the state health care system.

However, as reported in the *Bay Area Reporter* last week, Holsinger has had a long parallel career as an anti-gay zealot within the upper echelon of the Methodist Church.

Soulforce Lexington, Kentucky coordinator Jamie McDaniel told the *Lexington Herald-Leader* that Holsinger "has demonstrated in the past that he harbors religious-based prejudice toward homosexuals. As a gay American, I am deeply concerned over any surgeon general nominee not being healed of such personal prejudice."

That prompted those at Focus on the Family to play the victim card. "Man of faith is under fire for biblical stance on homosexuality," said a headline written by Jennifer Mesko, an editor at CitizenLink.com. The far right is claiming that this has become a religious test for public office.

Community reactions

"Holsinger is an ideologue whose medical views on gay and lesbian people resemble sorcery more than sound science," said Wayne Besen, executive director of Truth Wins Out. "It is clear that James Holsinger is to medicine what Alberto Gonzales is to justice."

"The health disparities experienced by the LGBT community should not be forgotten when one is speaking about how differential access, prejudice and ignorance often lead to poorer health outcomes for other groups in the U.S.," said David Haltiwanger, co-chair of the National Coalition for LGBT Health.

Gene Copello, executive director of the AIDS Institute, "expressed grave concern" with the nominee. If the "Pathophysiology" paper proves to be authentic, Copello does not believe that a person holding those views could serve as the nation's physician and effectively speak to gay and bisexual men who constitute the greater portion of the AIDS epidemic in the U.S.

David Fouse, communications director for the American Association of Public Health, said they are reviewing the nomination and have not yet taken a position on it.

Christine Lubinsky, executive director of the HIV Medicine Association, responded similarly.

The Senate committee that will review the nomination is chaired by Ted Kennedy (D-Massachusetts). Its members include Democratic presidential hopefuls Senators Hillary Clinton (New York), Barack Obama (Illinois), and Christopher Dodd (Connecticut). Should he be confirmed, Holsinger would serve into the third year of the next president's term.