



Surgeon General Nominee Could Face Confirmation Fight Over Concerns From Gay-Rights Groups

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James Holsinger, a Kentucky cardiologist who President Bush last month nominated as the next surgeon general, might "be headed for a nomination fight," after lawmakers and gay and lesbian advocacy groups raised concern about his position on gay-rights issues, CQ Today reports (Armstrong, CQ Today, 6/8). According to some gay rights groups, Holsinger in 1991 wrote in a report for a United Methodist committee that gay sex is unnatural and potentially leads to serious health issues (Alonso-Zaldivar, Los Angeles Times, 6/9). Holsinger's "friends within the United Methodist Church and the medical community, however, are defending him as a professional who does not discriminate against people in his congregation or in his care," according to the New York Times (Banerjee, New York Times, 6/9).

Holsinger has served as secretary of the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services and as chancellor of the University of Kentucky Medical Center. Holsinger also had a 26-year career with the Department of Veterans Affairs, where he served as undersecretary for health in 1992. In addition, Holsinger served for more than 30 years in the Army Reserve, until he retired as a major general in 1993. The term of the previous surgeon general, Richard Carmona, expired last summer (Kaiser Daily Health Policy Report, 5/25).

Senate Questions: The Holsinger nomination has "raised questions in the Senate," the New York Times reports. Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), chair of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, in a statement said that he was "disappointed" the Bush administration had selected a nominee for surgeon general "whose record appears to guarantee a polarizing and divisive nomination process."

Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.), a committee member and a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, in a statement that he had "serious reservations" about the Holsinger nomination. According to the Human Rights Campaign, based on his record, Holsinger is "unworthy" of the surgeon general position (New York Times, 6/9). Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) and former Sen. John Edwards (D-N.C.), both candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination, also announced their opposition to the Holsinger nomination (Los Angeles Times, 6/9). The Senate HELP Committee plans to hold a confirmation hearing on the Holsinger nomination in the next few weeks (CQ Today, 6/11).

Additional Comments: F. Douglas Scutchfield of the University of Kentucky College of Public Health said Holsinger stood up to state politicians who threatened to withhold funding from a women's health conference in 2002 because it had a session on health care for lesbians. According to Scutchfield, "Dr. Holsinger's posture was that regardless of people's nature, we need to understand the problems and concerns they have."

Maria Kemplin, a former colleague of Holsinger's who is a lesbian, in a letter to Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) wrote, "I am a liberal Democrat and a member of gay and women's rights organizations," adding, "Still, I strongly support Dr. Jim Holsinger as a leader and administrator who is able to see across divisive issues and relate with integrity to people, no matter their life circumstance" (New York Times, 6/9).

Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, in a statement said, "The Bush administration is once again elevating ideology over public policy. ... Dr. Holsinger's record shows that his own biases will not allow him to look objectively at scientific information." However, HHS spokesperson Christina Pearson said that Holsinger is "focused on addressing the health of all in need, including gay and lesbian populations" (CQ Today, 6/11).