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Uproar over surgeon general nominee

Gay rights groups oppose Bush's pick, a Kentucky cardiologist, questioning his views on homosexuality.

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By Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar, Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON — President Bush's nominee for surgeon general ran into intensified opposition Friday, as two leading Democratic presidential candidates joined major gay and lesbian groups in urging his rejection by the Senate.

Dr. James W. Holsinger Jr., 68, a prominent cardiologist and former state health director in Kentucky, was nominated by Bush last month with a mandate to fight childhood obesity.

But controversy has erupted over a paper Holsinger wrote 16 years ago on human anatomy and homosexuality, as well as his role in church battles over policies toward gays. The furor may pose an insurmountable obstacle to his confirmation.

The paper, written as part of a debate within the United Methodist Church over its stance on homosexuality, suggested gay sex was unnatural.

Former Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina and Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York, both vying for the Democratic presidential nomination, announced opposition to his appointment.

Holsinger is "a nominee who will divide America," Edwards said, castigating what he termed the doctor's "anti-gay writings and beliefs."

A spokesman for Clinton said that she intended to oppose Holsinger's confirmation and that she hoped Bush would reconsider the nomination.

Christina Pearson, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Health and Human Services Department, defended Holsinger, saying that charges of anti-gay bias are unfounded and distort his 40-year record of public service.

"He has told me very directly of his wish to serve the needs of all Americans, including gay and lesbian populations," Pearson said. She said that in 2002 he supported the inclusion of a panel on lesbian health at a conference in Kentucky, despite social conservatives' opposition.

Holsinger did not respond to a request for an interview.

The surgeon general functions as the nation's family doctor. The office is responsible for providing the public with information on how to improve their health and reduce the risks of illness and injury.

Some surgeon generals have used the post to crusade against smoking and problems such as disparities in healthcare for minorities. And some have proved controversial. In 1994, then-President Clinton asked Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders to resign after she told a forum on AIDS

that children "perhaps should be taught" masturbation.

Holsinger's nomination is pending before the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. Its chairman, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), joined in criticizing the nominee: "I am disappointed that the administration looked past the many talented physicians who have a record of bringing people together and instead chose an individual whose record appears to guarantee a polarizing and divisive nomination process."

Clinton serves on the committee, along with two other Democratic presidential candidates — Sens. Christopher J. Dodd of Connecticut and Barack Obama of Illinois. Dodd and Obama previously have issued strongly worded statements of concern about Holsinger's views, but they stopped short of saying they would oppose his confirmation.

Bush nominated Holsinger in late May; opposition led by the Human Rights Campaign, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and other gay rights groups has built in recent days as questions surfaced about his views on homosexuality.

Holsinger is a professor of preventive medicine at the University of Kentucky. Much of the uproar stems from his role as an official of the United Methodist Church, the nation's second-largest Protestant denomination. His 1991 paper was written for a church committee studying homosexuality. In it, he argued that anatomy suggests human beings were meant to be heterosexual. Sex between people of the same gender — especially men — could lead to many serious health problems, he wrote.

"When the complementarity of the sexes is breached, injuries and diseases may occur," he concluded.

Holsinger also serves as president of the Methodists' judicial council, which adjudicates disputes over church rules and policies. Last year, he voted to support a pastor who blocked a gay man from joining his congregation, the Associated Press reported. In 2004, he voted to expel a lesbian from the clergy, according to the AP.

The surgeon general's job has been filled on a temporary basis since Bush appointee Richard H. Carmona resigned last year.