

Gay groups oppose Bush surgeon general nominee

Ky. doctor condemned homosexuality in '91 report

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The Human Rights Campaign and the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force are calling on the U.S. Senate to defeat President Bush's nomination of a Kentucky doctor to become the next surgeon general.

The two groups said physician James Holsinger, a University of Kentucky public health professor and former state health director, has a record of anti-gay bias in his role as a high-level official in the United Methodist Church.

Among other things, HRC and the Task Force point to a 1991 paper called "Pathophysiology of Male Homosexuality" that Holsinger wrote for the Committee to Study Homosexuality for the United Methodist Church.

In the paper, Holsinger says anal intercourse goes against the human male's anatomical and physiological "structure and function," which he said were designed for excretion rather than reproduction.

He said that by contrast, heterosexual intercourse provides a "complementarity of the human sexes" that is less prone to sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS.

The Lexington Herald-Leader, a daily newspaper in Kentucky, also reported that Holsinger helped form a new Methodist congregation in the state that includes a ministry to help gays convert to heterosexuality.

In addition, the newspaper reported that as a member of the Methodist Church's nine-member Judicial Council, Holsinger opposed a church decision to allow a lesbian to be an associate pastor and supported another pastor's decision to refuse an openly gay man's request to join the church.

"With the nomination of Dr. Holsinger for surgeon general, the Bush administration is once again elevating ideology over public policy and once again throwing red meat to its ravenous anti-gay supporters," said Matt Foreman, executive director of the Task Force.

"Dr. Holsinger's record shows that his own biases will not allow him to look objectively at scientific information," Foreman said. "Consequently, he is not qualified to be surgeon general and we call upon the Senate to promptly reject his nomination."

Joe Solmonese, president of HRC, said Holsinger's 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 has declined to respond to news media inquires about his views on gays and homosexuality, saying he is following a longstanding policy that requires presidential nominees to withhold public comment until the time of their Senate confirmation hearing.

A spokesperson for the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions said the committee has yet to set a date for a hearing on Holsinger's confirmation. Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) chairs the committee.

Three Democratic presidential candidates are members of the panel, and gay rights advocates are expected to ask them to vote against the Holsinger nomination. The three are Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and Christopher Dodd.

The White House announced President Bush's decision to nominate Holsinger for the surgeon general's post on May 24.

Holsinger, 68, is the Charles T. Wethington Jr. Chair in the University of Kentucky's Health Sciences Department. He also serves as a professor of preventive medicine at the university's College of Public Health. In 2003, Kentucky Gov. Ernie Fletcher, a Republican, named Holsinger Secretary of the Cabinet for Health & Family Services, where he served for two years. Before taking that position, he served from 1994 to 2003 as chancellor of the University of Kentucky Medical Center. Holsinger worked for 26 years as a physician with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Fletcher, the Kentucky governor, defended Holsinger's record, saying he is highly qualified to be surgeon general.

"He has a reputation for being an excellent physician and administrator," Fletcher told the Lexington Herald-Leader. "Anyone who knows Jim Holsinger knows that he's not an individual given to prejudice."

Others supporting his nomination told the Herald-Leader that he is not biased against gays and that his actions on the Methodist Church council related to gay issues were dictated by church rules and biblical teachings rather than personal prejudice.

The Herald-Leader reported that Holsinger and his wife, Barbara, are longtime members of Lexington's First United Methodist Church, which asked the two to start a new congregation in the Lexington area.

According to the paper, they founded Hope Springs Community Church in a warehouse and arranged for the church to offer a "recovery ministry" to help the homeless; people with addictions to drugs, alcohol and sex; and people who wish to change from gay to straight.

Robert Garofalo, a physician who serves as president of the Gay & Lesbian Medical Association, said the medical paper on homosexuality attributed to Holsinger "does not represent current medical science."

"[It] is more a philosophical treatise in the tradition of 'natural law' arguments posited by theologians dating back to Thomas Aquinas," Garofalo said. "As such, it is a piece of rhetoric and not a serious or useful scientific statement."

The Gay & Lesbian Medical Association issued a statement calling on Holsinger to clarify whether he would allow his personal religious views to "cloud his professional judgment" in his role as surgeon general. The group stopped short of opposing Holsinger's nomination.

AIDS Action, a national AIDS advocacy group, joined HRC and the Task Force in announcing its opposition to the Holsinger nomination.