



Surgeon general nominee on hold

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By Justin Thompson

WASHINGTON - Three months after Dr. James Holsinger answered some sharp questions from senators, his nomination to be the next surgeon general appears to be on life support.

The 68-year-old Kentuckian, whose critics cried foul about a paper he wrote years ago condemning homosexual sex, needs Senate confirmation to become the nation's 18th surgeon general.

Melissa Wagoner, a spokeswoman for Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., who chairs the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, said members are waiting for the nominee to answer follow-up questions. Wagoner said she could not release the questions while Holsinger continues to work on them.

Craig Orfield, the committee's communications director, said he knows of no date for a vote.

A spokeswoman for the White House said Holsinger is working on the questions but could not say when he would respond.

The questions are related to his views on homosexuality, his record at the Department of Veterans Affairs and his plans to deal with childhood obesity, which he said would be his highest priority as surgeon general, speculated Rebecca Fox, director of the National Coalition for LGBT Health, which works on lesbian, gay and bisexual health issues.

Jerry Farrell, executive director of the Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Services, said that Holsinger's prospects for confirmation appear dim, despite the nominee's "tremendous service" to public health.

"From the tea leaves that I am reading, there is not a lot of interest in getting a vote," he said.

His organization has neither opposed nor endorsed Holsinger's nomination, Farrell said.

He would not speculate on whether Holsinger might remove his name from consideration or if the administration might ask him to do so.

He said he expected that Dr. Steven Galson, who has served as acting surgeon general for the last three months, would continue in that role through the end of the year.

The president has the option of appointing Holsinger after Congress adjourns later in the fall; the White House would not comment on that possibility.

Fox, an outspoken critic of Holsinger's nomination, said she hopes the president will refrain from using that power, as he did in August, and wait for Holsinger to respond to the committee's questions.

Some of Holsinger's opponents said the White House might support him in theory, but in practice, has done little to move him closer to becoming surgeon general.

"They're not pushing to get this through," said Becky Dansky, federal legislative director for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

"It's kind of dead in the water at this point."

But the Bush administration said it has not reconsidered its endorsement of Holsinger.

"The White House certainly still supports him," said Emily Lawrimore, a White House spokeswoman.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., of Louisville, who introduced Holsinger to the committee in July, said then that the nomination is "the right prescription to help America confront today's health challenge." This week, a McConnell spokesman said that the Louisville Republican continues to support Holsinger.

McConnell's fellow Kentucky Republican, Sen. Jim Bunning of Southgate, also championed Holsinger at the hearing, but has since remained silent. A spokesman for Bunning said the senator remains steadfast in his support.

Unfortunately for Holsinger, neither McConnell nor Bunning is a member of Kennedy's committee, and Sen. Michael Enzi, R-Wyo., the committee's ranking Republican, has not said how he would vote.

Holsinger has served in government medical positions before, as Kentucky health secretary and as chief medical director of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

The president tapped Holsinger in May to replace former surgeon general Dr. Richard Carmona, who resigned in August 2006 after complaining that the White House stymied his attempts to speak about stem-cell research and the psychological trauma faced by 9-11 responders.

When Holsinger appeared before the Senate committee, he tried to allay concerns about the controversial paper he wrote in 1991 for the United Methodist Church's committee to study homosexuality.

In "Pathophysiology of Male Homosexuality," Holsinger contended that homosexual sex was neither natural nor healthy.

At the hearing, Holsinger portrayed the report as a literature review of previous reports. Some of the authors of those reports accused Holsinger of misconstruing facts.

The Human Rights Campaign, a gay-rights advocacy group, the AIDS Healthcare Foundation, People for the American Way, the National Coalition for LGBT Health and the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force** denounced his nomination because of the paper.

Holsinger, who declined to comment outside of the hearings, has spent the time since his nomination 500 miles from the political battle, at the University of Kentucky's College of Public

Health in Lexington. There, he teaches classes on health care ethics, health services leadership and health care management.

Stephen Wyatt, the College of Public Health dean, described the surgeon general nominee as "very active" outside the classroom, mentoring junior faculty, consulting and chairing committees.

Wyatt has worked with surgeons general before. From 1980 to 2000, he held several positions in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, including deputy center director.

"None of the folks I worked with would be stronger than Dr. Holsinger," he said.

Wyatt has prepared for a replacement professor in case the Senate confirms Holsinger, but he said he has no idea if or when that might happen.

Dansky puts those chances at "slim to none." Three of the Democrats on the committee - Democrats Barack Obama of Illinois, Hillary Clinton of New York and Chris Dodd of Connecticut - seem unlikely to vote to confirm Holsinger and risk a backlash from gay and lesbian voters against their presidential campaigns, she said. And Kennedy has a record of voting for gay and lesbian rights.

Other committee members, including Sens. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, and Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., have not publicly announced how they would vote, though Brown and Mikulski questioned Holsinger aggressively during the hearing.

Mikulski clashed with him when he was the VA's chief medical director, accusing him of being apathetic toward what she called the system's mistreatment of women.

"There is no reason to think he is going to make it out of committee," Dansky said.

"The votes just aren't there."