



United States Surgeon General

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Surgeon General Releases Call to Action to Promote Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual Behavior

On June 28, Surgeon General David Satcher unveiled science-based strategies which he said represent an effort to find “common ground” upon which the nation could work to promote sexual health and responsible sexual behavior.

In releasing *The Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Promote Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual Behavior*, Satcher called for strategies that focused upon increasing awareness, implementing and strengthening interventions, and expanding the research base relating to sexual health matters.

“We face a serious public health challenge regarding the sexual health of our nation,” Satcher said. “Doing nothing is unacceptable. If we are to meet this challenge, we must find common ground and reach consensus on the nature of these problems and their possible solutions, consistent with the best available science.”

Satcher cites a number of sexually-related public health problems, including:

- the infection of 12 million Americans a year with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs);
- 800,000 to 900,000 Americans living with HIV, with one-third of them unaware that they are even infected;
- unintended pregnancies accounting for nearly one-half of all pregnancies in the U.S.;
- an estimated 1.36 million abortions in 1996;
- an estimated 104,000 children becoming victims of sexual abuse each year.
- reports that 22 percent of American women and 2 percent of American men have been victims of a forced sexual act.

Satcher said the *Call to Action* represented “only a first step – a call to begin a mature, thoughtful, and respectful discussion nationwide about sexuality.”

Strategies geared toward increasing awareness include a recognition that parents are the child’s primary educators and should guide a child’s sexuality education in a way that is consistent with their values and beliefs. They also recognize that families differ in their level of knowledge and comfort in discussing such issues, making school education a vital component in providing equity of access to information. They

also note that churches and other community settings can play a role in providing such education.

Such information should be thorough and wide-ranging, begin early, and continue throughout the life span. Education should recognize the special place that sexuality has in everyday life; stress the value and benefits of remaining abstinent until involved in a committed, enduring, and mutually monogamous relationship; and assure awareness of optimal protection from sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancy, while also stressing that there are no infallible methods of contraception aside from abstinence, and that condoms cannot protect against some forms of STDs.

Strategies geared toward implementing and strengthening interventions call for the strengthening of families, adequate training in sexual health to all professionals who deal with sexual issues in their work, improved access to related health care services and the elimination of disparities in health status that arise from social and economic disadvantage.

Research-oriented strategies would promote further scientific study of human sexual development and reproductive health that covers the entire lifespan, would improve evaluation efforts for interventions, and would help in the development of educational materials.

The Call to Action was developed through a collaborative process. In June 1999, Satcher formed a work group charged with finding ways to move forward on promoting sexual health and responsible sexual behaviors. He subsequently commissioned scientific review papers and held conferences in Newport, R.I., and Warrenton, Va.. Each of the conferences were attended by more than 100 people of varying experience, expertise and perspectives – including the academic, religious, policymaking, education, and advocacy communities, as well as parents and youth.

Satcher is the 16th Surgeon General. Since taking office in 1998, he has issued landmark reports on issues including mental health, youth violence, smoking and women's health, children's mental health, and suicide prevention.

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