

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

December 18, 2002

The Honorable Tommy G. Thompson
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Thompson:

We are writing to protest the alteration and removal of important public health information from federal websites concerning (1) the use of condoms to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and (2) the alleged association between abortion and breast cancer. In both cases, the Department of Health and Human Services removed scientific fact sheets from its websites earlier this year and has now reposted significantly altered versions. These new versions distort and suppress scientific information for ideological purposes.

* On October 21, 2002, twelve House members, including several of us sending this letter, wrote to you expressing concern that scientific information that does not fit the Administration's political agenda is being suppressed. Among other examples, we noted that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) had removed from their website the fact sheet entitled "Condoms and Their Use in Preventing HIV Infection and Other STDs" and that the National Cancer Institute (NCI) had removed scientific information finding that there is no demonstrated link between abortion and breast cancer.

You responded on November 27, 2002, explaining that the reason that the fact sheet on condoms had been taken down from the CDC's website was that some of the scientific information on the fact sheet had become out of date. According to your response "CDC and NIH scientists have worked to update the fact sheet and it will appear on the CDC website shortly." You further responded that the information on abortion and breast cancer had been removed "to review the accuracy and completeness of its content." You also said that you are "committed to maintaining and strengthening the Department's reputation for excellence and scientific integrity."

The recent revisions to the CDC and NCI fact sheets make it clear, however, that political ideology — not "excellence and scientific integrity" — have guided the development of the new fact sheets.

The CDC Fact Sheet on Condoms and Sexually Transmitted Diseases

The CDC recently posted an altered version of the fact sheet on condom use, calling it the "Fact Sheet for Public Health Personnel: Male Latex Condoms and Sexually Transmitted

Diseases.”¹ The revisions to the CDC’s fact sheet conflict fundamentally with your commitment to make scientifically sound information available to the public. Instead, the new fact sheet has been carefully edited to deny the public important information about the role condoms can play in reducing sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancies. The alterations are certainly not in the interest of the public health, and they appear to have been made for political rather than scientific reasons.

The first change in the fact sheet is the deletion of important information on how to use condoms effectively. The original fact sheet read: “As mentioned previously, the primary reason that condoms sometimes fail to prevent HIV/STD infection or pregnancy is incorrect or inconsistent use, not failure of the condoms itself.” The fact sheet then goes on to describe the five steps for effective use of the condom.

Information describing the proper use of condoms has been completely purged from the current fact sheet. The fact sheet does point out that in order for condoms to protect against the transmission of HIV, they must be used correctly, but there is no discussion of how to use condoms correctly. Other CDC websites about condoms and HIV transmission point the user to this fact sheet for more detailed information about condoms.² But that detailed information is no longer available on this webpage.

The fact sheet also deletes information regarding the relative efficacy and usefulness of different condoms. The original fact sheet had a section entitled “Condom users have product options.” This section provided a detailed description of different condom types and how they perform with respect to HIV/STD transmission. Specifically, the fact sheet explained that some condoms, like lambskin condoms or novelty condoms, should not be used for HIV prevention. The fact sheet also explained that for people who are allergic to latex, there are synthetic materials that have also been shown to provide an effective barrier to HIV. The current fact sheet does not have this information, making it more difficult for people to make informed choices about which condoms are effective in preventing HIV transmissions and which are not.

Finally, the original fact sheet discussed the numerous studies that have shown that HIV education and sex education that included information about condoms “either had no effect upon the initiation of intercourse or resulted in delayed onset of intercourse.” This information has been completely expunged from the revised fact sheet. In fact, according to recent press accounts, the Administration is now taking the exact opposite position at an international conference on population, arguing that despite scientific studies to the contrary, providing

¹According to this new fact sheet, it was updated on December 2, 2002.

²See *How Effective Are Latex Condoms in Preventing HIV* (available online at <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pubs/faq/faq23.htm>).

education about condom use will increase teenage sex. For example, Reuters has reported that the Administration is seeking to delete a reference to “consistent condom use” as a means of reducing HIV infection.³ According to the Associated Press, the Administration’s position is that promoting condom use, even for HIV prevention, will encourage teenage sex.⁴

The apparent purpose of these alterations and deletions is to remove information that conflicts with the Administration’s preference for “abstinence-only” programs. Proponents of abstinence-only programs have long claimed that providing information about contraception, including condoms, encourages young people to have sex. Although the research clearly rebuts these claims, the CDC appears to have abandoned its commitment to be guided by this research. Instead, it is now censoring the scientific information about condoms that it makes available to the public.

The NCI Fact Sheet on Abortion and Breast Cancer

The newly posted, but altered information on the NCI website regarding the alleged link between abortion and breast cancer is another example of science being distorted for ideological reasons. On November 25, the National Cancer Institute posted “Early Reproductive Events and Breast Cancer,” a fact sheet intended to replace “Abortion and Breast Cancer,” which was taken down earlier this year. As with information on condom use, the new NCI fact sheet appears to have been changed to reflect the political agenda of the White House, not scientific facts.

The original NCI information stated: “The current body of scientific evidence suggests that women who have had either induced or spontaneous abortions have the same risk as other women for developing breast cancer.”

This conclusion was based on a reasoned analysis of available studies. The NCI fact sheet noted that early studies were inconsistent, with some investigators reporting an increase in risk and others finding no such increase. The fact sheet indicated that these early studies “relied on self-reports of induced abortion, which have been shown to differ between breast cancer patients and other women” and had other problems, including “small numbers of women, questions of comparability between women with breast cancer and those without, inability to separate induced from spontaneous abortions and incomplete knowledge of other breast cancer risk factors that may have been related to a woman’s history of abortion.” For these reasons, the original NCI fact sheet found that the most important studies were several recent large and better designed investigations. As the NCI fact sheet correctly stated, these recent studies “generally

³*U.S. Anti-Abortion Stand Under Fire at U.N. Meeting*, Reuters (Dec. 16, 2002).

⁴*Population Meeting Delegates Blast United States for Anti-Abortion Stand*, Associated Press (Dec. 16, 2002).

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show no association between breast cancer risk and previously recorded spontaneous or induced abortions.” The largest such study was of such high quality that it was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.⁵

The “updated” NCI information presents none of this reasoned analysis of the difference among studies of abortion and breast cancer risk. It instead states:

[T]he possible relationship between abortion and breast cancer has been examined in over thirty published studies since 1957. Some studies have reported statistically significant evidence of an increased risk of breast cancer in women who have had abortions, while others have merely suggested an increased risk. Other studies have found no increase in risk among women who had an interrupted pregnancy.

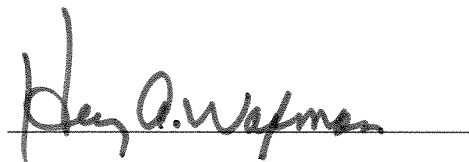
The contrast between the original and revised NCI information is striking. Rather than a measured scientific discussion leading to a conclusion that available evidence does not support an increase in risk, NCI’s web site now simplistically says that studies are “inconsistent.” This is nothing more than the political creation of scientific uncertainty. The disturbing result of political interference with NCI’s information is that the revised fact sheet may unnecessarily scare women who have either spontaneous or induced abortions about their risk of breast cancer.

Conclusion

We are extremely concerned about these alterations and deletions of important scientific information. They appear to be part of an Orwellian trend at HHS. Simply put, information that used to be based on science is being systematically removed from the public when it conflicts with the Administration’s political agenda.

We urge you to stop this subversion of science and suppression of information. Your job should be to make sure that people who visit the CDC and NCI websites are fully informed — not to limit their access to vital health information.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Henry A. Waxman", is written over a horizontal line.

⁵Mads Melbye, *Induced Abortion and the Risk of Breast Cancer*, *New England Journal of Medicine* (Jan. 9, 1997).

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