
New Hampshire

AIDS policy fight breaks into the open

by John Grauerholz, M.D.

In what appears to be a resolution of the administration factional fight over AIDS policy, first signaled by Secretary of Education William Bennett's call for mandatory AIDS testing for certain groups, President Ronald Reagan ordered a letter sent to Gov. John Sununu (R) of New Hampshire, supporting the latter's proposal for mandatory premarital testing for AIDS infection. The action was a response to lobbying by three members of the Atlanta Centers for Disease Control, and a letter by Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, which were instrumental in a 165-136 defeat of the measure by the New Hampshire state legislature on May 15. According to a syndicated column by Rowland Evans and Robert Novak published May 20, when Reagan was informed of these actions, he responded angrily, and ordered the dispatch of a letter encouraging Sununu to push for legislative reconsideration.

The provision for premarital testing had been added to House Bill 322-A, which was to provide \$600,000 for AIDS "education." After a series of skirmishes, including a threat by Sununu that he would veto any bill which did not contain the testing provision, a version of the bill containing a provision which mandated premarital testing to begin on Oct. 1, 1987, passed the Senate by a vote of 13-11, and was sent to a House-Senate conference committee. The committee, consisting of four representatives and three senators, then produced a compromise version which retained the premarital testing provision, but put off the starting date till March 1, 1988. It was this bill which was defeated, in a vote in which 98 members of the House did not even participate.

Following the defeat of HB 322-A, a second conference committee, of four representatives and three senators, was convened. All favored allowing the "AIDS education only" bill, except Sen. Edward DuPont, who argued that 1) AIDS is the biggest problem the country will face in the coming years; 2) any honest effort to get the AIDS problem under control means gathering the physical data by testing the population for future evaluation; 3) the premarital testing provision focuses on the health of the unborn, and even if the percentage testing positive were small, saving only one or two children's lives is worth the cost; and 4) there is no room for discussing AIDS education without AIDS testing.

He added that even if many colleagues do not feel as strongly, the general population does agree with the need for testing. He noted that medical experts contacted from around the country, who are involved in testing, have documented the accuracy of the tests. He told the legislators that they would be wise to implement limited testing procedures now, because when the legislature reconvenes in six months, the impetus for broader testing would be much greater. Finally, he noted that the military, the National Guard, the Peace Corps, and the foreign service, have all instituted testing. New Hampshire should act, he said, even if other states have failed to.

The committee recessed after a deadlock, with the liberals refusing to accept testing. Then, in a stinging defeat for the House liberals who had scuttled the premarital testing amendment, the state Senate then refused to approve the bill without the amendment. In a 12-12 vote, the Senate refused to give the two-thirds vote required to reconsider the bill so late in the session. This was consistent with Governor Sununu's statement that he would veto the bill unless it contained the AIDS testing amendment.

National focus on New Hampshire

The Reagan letter follows a mobilization of support for the testing bill by the LaRouche Democratic Campaign in New Hampshire. Telegrams and calls of support came in from around the country, including from the office of California Congressman William Dannemeyer (R), who is sponsoring a number of bills for mandatory testing at the federal level. Calls also came in to legislators who voted against the amendment, and to those who failed to vote. This, combined with a tour by this writer, the LaRouche campaign medical adviser, is creating a climate in which New Hampshire may yet set the national precedent for a serious approach to the AIDS pandemic.

It is ironic that the same arguments against premarital testing which were advanced in New Hampshire, have now been abandoned by the California physicians who previously used them against similar legislation in that state. These people, who argued against Proposition 64, the ballot referendum which was defeated in the November 1986 state election, are now crying for a state of emergency in California because of AIDS, and for testing, especially in prenatal clinics, because of the growing number of congenitally infected infants.

The President's tardy, but nonetheless important, intervention into the New Hampshire situation reflects the growing awareness that, unless serious steps are taken soon, the AIDS problem could become uncontrollable. It is about time that public policy caught up with the growing public awareness of the danger which confronts us. Governor Sununu deserves the support of all those who realize the importance of setting a precedent for finally doing something which will actually slow the spread of AIDS.