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July 13, 2005

Honorable Michael O. Leavitt
Secretary of Health and Human Services
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Mr. Secretary:

On March 25, 2005, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) launched the 4parents.gov website to “equip parents to talk with their teens about sex and relationships while encouraging them to remain abstinent from unhealthy behaviors.” I am writing to inform you that leading scientists consider this website to be inaccurate and ineffective.

The 4parents.gov website was not put together by experts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or any other science-based agency of the federal government. Instead, it was produced by an obscure organization called the National Physicians Center for Family Resources that has criticized the National Institutes of Health (NIH) for finding that condoms are highly effective and has erroneously linked abortion to breast cancer.

On March 31, a number of public health organizations raised questions about the accuracy of the information on 4parents.gov. Instead of addressing their concerns, HHS attacked these groups for failing to support the Administration’s policy initiative on “abstinence only” education.

To learn more about these issues, I contacted four national experts in infectious disease, adolescent sexuality, reproductive health, and adolescent development. I asked them to review the website and provide specific suggestions for improvement. The experts’ reviews, which are attached for your consideration, identified several major problems with the site. These concerns included:

- **4parents.gov provides inaccurate information on sexually transmitted diseases.** According to the experts, the website understates the effectiveness of condoms, provides wrong information about HIV and other sexually transmitted disease, misstates the

relative risks of different types of sexual behaviors, and inappropriately relies on *Seventeen* magazine for scientific information.

- **4parents.gov's dismissive message on contraception is likely to backfire.** According to the experts, the site's emphasis on the failure rates of condoms will leave youth more likely to have unprotected sex. One expert stated that the site "virtually abandons parents whose children are sexually active, providing them with no guidance in helping their children understand how to reduce their risks."
- **4parents.gov uses inappropriate language and provides incomplete information about sexual orientation.** One expert said that the site errs by referring to gay and lesbian "lifestyles," rather than "people." This expert also criticized the site for stating that teens who question their sexual orientation are at increased risk for suicide without explaining that this risk is "most often due to rejection, ostracism, harassment, and even violence by biased peers and adults."
- **4parents.gov derogates divorce and single parents.** Another expert criticized the site's handling of divorce, stating that "the not-so-subtle suggestion that divorce and single parenthood are responsible for the nation's social ills will alienate many potential users of the site, a large portion of whom are themselves single parents with adolescent children."
- **4parents.gov has misplaced priorities.** Although most of the website is devoted to issues relating to teen sex, the site also discusses other "unhealthy behaviors." Yet the site's emphasis on these risks is skewed. One expert noted that while "alcohol and tobacco are clearly the most serious health risks to which teenagers are exposed ... they receive less attention than ... tattoos and body piercings."

Several of the experts praised elements of the site, including information on anorexia, bulimia, and general instructions on how to talk to teenagers. All of the experts, however, recommended significant changes to improve its accuracy and effectiveness.

While our government can play an important role in helping parents talk to their teens about important health issues, public health information should be based on the best available science. I urge you to take the 4parents.gov site down and assign a team of government experts or highly qualified external scientists to fix its problems. I also urge you to provide Congress with information about how this inaccurate and misleading website was created.

Background

On March 25, 2005, HHS launched the 4parents.gov website to "equip parents to talk with their teens about sex and relationships while encouraging them to remain abstinent from

unhealthy behaviors.”¹ The website provides information about a variety of topics, including “abstinence, development & health,” “parenting,” “mental health,” and “risky behaviors.” It also highlights strategies, such as “talk tips” and “conversation starters,” that parents can use to communicate with their teenagers. In announcing the site, you stated that the issues this website covers “are some of the most important teens face physically and emotionally.”²

Soon after its launch, it became apparent that in developing its content, HHS did not rely upon scientists from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), or any other science-based agency. Nor did HHS seek assistance from a major professional medical society, such as the American Academy of Pediatrics or the Society for Adolescent Medicine.

Instead, the content on 4parents.gov was provided by the National Physicians Center for Family Resources, a nonprofit entity based in Alabama and California.³ Although little is known about the National Physicians Center for Family Resources, it does not appear to be a credible science-based organization. The organization has been a leading advocate for the view that there is “strong scientific evidence linking abortion to an increased risk of breast cancer,” even though major scientific studies and expert groups have reached the opposite conclusion.⁴ The organization also has rejected the findings of the National Institutes of Health on condom effectiveness, calling the NIH conclusions “medical malpractice” and “misguided and misleading.”⁵

¹ Department of Health and Human Services, *HHS Announces Communication Tools To Help Parents Talk To Their Teens About Abstinence* (Mar. 25, 2005) (online at www.hhs.gov/news/press/2005pres/20050325.html).

² *Id.*

³ 4parents.gov, *About 4parents* (accessed on June 27, 2005) (online at <http://www.4parents.gov/aboutus/index.html>); *HHS: Just Say No*, National Journal (Apr. 2, 2005).

⁴ National Physicians Center for Family Resources, *Abortion - Breast Cancer Connection* (online at http://www.physicianscenter.org/positions_abortion.asp). The position of the National Physicians Center for Family Resources on this issue was most recently refuted in 2003 by the National Cancer Institute, which found that “[i]nduced abortion is not associated with an increase in breast cancer risk.” National Cancer Institute, *Summary Report: Early Reproductive Events and Breast Cancer Workshop* (Mar. 4, 2003) (online at <http://www.cancer.gov/cancerinfo/ere-workshop-report>).

⁵ National Physicians Center for Family Resources, *Physicians Call NIH Condom Report Misguided and Misleading* (July 23, 2001).

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In a letter dated March 31, public health groups wrote to you that the accuracy of 4parents.gov had been skewed by the ideological biases of the National Physicians Center for Family Resources.⁶ The groups provided details on a variety of medical and factual errors on the website.

A spokesperson for HHS responded by stating: “They’ve always opposed us on the issue of abstinence. That’s fine. ... One thing we do know about abstinence is that if you practice it, you will not have an unintended pregnancy or risk catching a sexually transmitted disease.”⁷ This response did not address any of the specific concerns raised.

Expert Review of 4parents.gov

Because there was no indication that a credible internal or external review of this website had been conducted, I asked four national experts in the fields of infectious disease, child psychiatry, reproductive health, and child psychology to conduct their own independent assessments. These experts, who have each published scores of research articles in peer-reviewed medical literature and have held important leadership positions in their fields, are:

- **Dr. King K. Holmes**, Director of the University of Washington’s Center for AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases.⁸ Dr. Holmes has recently authored a comprehensive review of the effectiveness of condoms in preventing sexually transmitted disease.⁹
- **Dr. Richard R. Pleak**, the Director of Education in the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Schneider Children’s Hospital in New York. Dr. Pleak is the Chair of the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identify Issues Committee of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.¹⁰

⁶ Letter to Michael O. Leavitt, Secretary, Department of Health and Human Services, from the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, et al. (Mar. 31, 2005).

⁷ *Government Web Site Telling Parents to Promote Teen Abstinence Draws Protest*, Associated Press (Mar. 31, 2005).

⁸ Letter from Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives to King K. Holmes, M.D., Ph.D. (May 3, 2005).

⁹ K. Holmes, R. Levine, M. Weaver, *Effectiveness of Condoms in Preventing Sexually Transmitted Infections*, Bulletin of the World Health Organization, 454-61 (2004).

¹⁰ Letter from Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives to Richard R. Pleak, M.D. (Apr. 29, 2005).

- **Dr. John S. Santelli**, Chair of the Department of Population and Family Health at Columbia University. Dr. Santelli is the past Chief of the Applied Sciences Branch of the Division of Reproductive Health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.¹¹
- **Professor Laurence Steinberg**, a Distinguished University Professor at Temple University. Dr. Steinberg is a child psychologist, the President-Elect of the Division of Developmental Psychology of the American Psychological Association, and a former President of the Society for Research on Adolescence.¹²

These national experts identified several serious shortcomings in 4parents.gov that undermine the website's effectiveness as a public health tool.

The Website Provides Inaccurate Information on Sexually Transmitted Diseases

A key focus of 4parents.gov is providing parents with information about potential consequences of sexual behavior to share with their teens. According to the experts, however, much of this information is erroneous.

4parents.gov features a table entitled "What Parents Need to Know about STDs." This table summarizes an array of information on a wide variety of sexually transmitted diseases. As part of his review, Dr. Holmes offered numerous corrections of the table.

In some cases, the site misstates basic facts. For example, the website describes HIV infection as having "No early symptoms."¹³ According to Dr. Holmes, this is wrong. The correct information is that "[e]arly symptoms" of HIV infection include "flu-like illness, rash."¹⁴

¹¹ Letter from Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives to John S. Santelli, M.D., M.P.H. (Apr. 29, 2005).

¹² Letter from Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives to Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D. (Apr. 29, 2005).

¹³ 4parents.gov, Department of Health and Human Services, *What Parents Need to Know about STDs* (accessed on June 27, 2005) (online at <http://www.4parents.gov/talktopics/table.htm>).

¹⁴ Letter from King K. Holmes, M.D., Ph.D. to Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives (May 27, 2005).

Frequently, the site misleadingly characterizes the effectiveness of condoms. For example:

- The chart states that for chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, and herpes simplex, “condom use is associated with some decreased risk. (Risk reduction is 50% or less.)”¹⁵ According to Dr. Holmes, the correct information is that “[c]ondom use is associated with significantly decreased risk.”¹⁶ In the case of gonorrhea, for example, “risk reduction is at least 50%.”¹⁷
- The chart states that there is “[n]o evidence that condom use reduces risk of HPV [human papillomavirus] infection. Some evidence that condoms reduce the risk of HPV-associated diseases.”¹⁸ According to Dr. Holmes, the correct information is that “[r]ecent evidence suggests that condom use reduces risk of HPV infection, and the risk of HPV-associated diseases.”¹⁹

The experts noted errors in the discussion of oral sex on 4parents.gov. The site states as fact that “[o]ral sex has taken the place of the ‘spin the bottle’ game with children as young as 11 and 12 years old.”²⁰ But the site’s evidence for the rising prevalence of oral sex among teens comes from anecdotal coverage in newspaper accounts and *Seventeen* magazine, not from scientific studies. Dr. Santelli commented that “there is little evidence that oral sex has increased over time or that this behavior has become widespread among 12 and 13 year olds.”²¹

¹⁵ 4parents.gov, Department of Health and Human Services, *What Parents Need to Know about STDs* (accessed on June 27, 2005) (online at <http://www.4parents.gov/talktopics/table.htm>).

¹⁶ Letter from King K. Holmes, *supra* note 14.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ 4parents.gov, Department of Health and Human Services, *What Parents Need to Know about STDs* (accessed on June 27, 2005) (online at <http://www.4parents.gov/talktopics/table.htm>).

¹⁹ Letter from King K. Holmes, *supra* note 14; *see also* Rachel L. Winer et al., *The Effect of Consistent Condom Use on the Risk of Genital HPV Infection Among Newly Sexually Active Young Women* (July 11, 2005) (presented at the 2005 meeting of the International Society for Sexually Transmitted Diseases Research).

²⁰ 4parents.gov, Department of Health and Human Services, *Risky Behaviors: Sex Related Risks* (accessed on June 27, 2005) (online at http://www.4parents.gov/topics/sexrelated_risks.htm).

²¹ Letter from John Santelli, M.D., M.P.H. to Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives (May 1, 2005).

4parents.gov also states that “Parents must make it clear to their children that oral sex is as dangerous in terms of disease as is intercourse.”²² Professor Steinberg described this statement as “completely at variance with the facts,”²³ and Dr. Santelli noted that “most [sexually transmitted infections] are less commonly transmitted orally and/or are less likely to result in disease.”²⁴

Overall, Dr. Santelli criticized 4parents.gov for ignoring “information which is usually provided by CDC and the National Institutes of Health.”²⁵

The Website’s Dismissive Message on Contraception Is Likely to Backfire

The site’s skewed presentation of data reflects its message, which, in Dr. Santelli’s words, is that “sex outside of marriage is extremely dangerous and the only solution is to abstain.”²⁶ The experts expressed the concern that such a message, which emphasizes the limitations of condom use, can actually promote risk-taking behavior.

According to Dr. Santelli, the website’s approach appears based on the fallacy that “young people ... engage in sexual intercourse because they have access to condoms.” In fact, he stated, “there is little scientific evidence to suggest that discouraging confidence in condoms will induce youth to abstain from sexual activity.”²⁷

What the website may promote is unsafe sex. According to Dr. Santelli, evidence indicates that “undermining adolescents’ confidence in condoms is likely to lead to non-use or inconsistent use of this method.”²⁸ Professor Steinberg agreed that teens who have received abstinence-only education, “but are nevertheless sexually active, are actually less likely to

²² 4parents.gov, Department of Health and Human Services, *Risky Behaviors: Sex Related Risks* (accessed on June 27, 2005) (online at http://www.4parents.gov/topics/sexrelated_risks.htm).

²³ Letter from Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D. to Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives (May 2, 2005).

²⁴ Letter from John Santelli, *supra* note 21.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

practice safe sex than those who have been provided with accurate information on how to protect themselves against pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.”²⁹

The website’s message barely addresses parents of youth who are already sexually active. The site advises such parents “to tell your teen that having multiple partners in their lifetime can be one of the biggest threats to their physical and emotional health.”³⁰ According to Dr. Santelli, this approach “virtually abandons parents whose children are sexually active, providing them with no guidance in helping their children understand how to reduce their risks of pregnancy or [sexually transmitted infections].”³¹

The Website Uses Inappropriate Language and Provides Incomplete Information about Sexual Orientation

When initially posted, 4parents.gov advised parents of teenagers with questions about sexual orientation to seek a therapist who “shares your values.” Dr. Pleak stated that this language gave “indications to parents that sexual orientation is a ‘lifestyle’ that can be changed by therapy.”³² After a few weeks, the website’s section on sexual orientation was revised, and the “share your values” language was removed.³³ However, several significant deficiencies in the handling of the issue remain.

One problem is placement. Dr. Pleak, when looking for information on sexual orientation, found that the section is “confusingly found under Abstinence from the Topics section on the banner at the top and not from the more obvious topics section on the sidebar.”³⁴ “Having it under Abstinence,” he wrote, “rather than included in the Sexual Development section is curious and gives the impression that sexual orientation is a negative topic.”³⁵

²⁹ Letter from Laurence Steinberg, *supra* note 23.

³⁰ 4parents.gov, Department of Health and Human Services, *About 4parents* (accessed on June 27, 2005) (online at <http://www.4parents.gov/talkteen/whatif.htm>).

³¹ Letter from John Santelli, *supra* note 21.

³² Letter from Richard R. Pleak, M.D. to Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives (June 7, 2005).

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.*

A second problem is language. The website still states that “your child is certain to hear about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender lifestyles at some point.”³⁶ Dr. Pleak noted that it would be more accurate to refer to “lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender *people*.”³⁷ He also advised that parents discuss “gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in your community and in the media” with their teens.

A third problem is completeness. 4parents.gov advises parents that “[s]ome teens who question their gender or relationships are at increased risk for depression, suicide or other problems.”³⁸ Yet the website does not provide important context. According to Dr. Pleak, the website fails to explain that the “increased risk of depression, suicide, and other problems” is “most often due to rejection, ostracism, harassment, and even violence by biased peers and adults.”³⁹

Other Expert Comments

Professor Steinberg criticized the site’s handling of divorce. While acknowledging that single-parent families are “often unavoidable,” 4parents.gov provides no advice or instruction for single parents. Instead, the site associates divorce and single-parent families with domestic violence, child abuse, drug use, and weapons charges.⁴⁰ Professor Steinberg wrote that “the not-so-subtle suggestion that divorce and single parenthood are responsible for the nation’s social ills will alienate many potential users of the site, a large portion of whom are themselves single parents with adolescent children.”⁴¹

Professor Steinberg also questioned the relative emphasis of 4parents.gov on various health topics. He stated, “Alcohol and tobacco use are clearly the most serious health risk behaviors to which teenagers are exposed yet they receive less attention than the topic of sexual predators on the Internet ... or tattoos and body piercings. No responsible website on teen health

³⁶ 4parents.gov, Department of Health and Human Services, *Abstinence: Sexual Orientation* (accessed on June 27, 2005) (online at <http://www.4parents.gov/topics/abstinence.htm#orientation>).

³⁷ Letter from Richard R. Pleak, *supra* note 32 (Emphasis added).

³⁸ 4parents.gov, Department of Health and Human Services, *Abstinence* (accessed June 27, 2005) (online at <http://www.4parents.gov/topics/abstinence.htm#orientation>).

³⁹ Letter from Richard R. Pleak, *supra* note 32.

⁴⁰ 4parents.gov, Department of Health and Human Services, *Parenting: Family Life* (accessed June 27, 2005) (online at <http://www.4parents.gov/topics/family.htm#marriage>).

⁴¹ *Id.*

should have such imbalanced coverage.”⁴² In addition, he recommended that the website cover other topics affecting teenagers, including “schooling, changes in the parent-child relationship during adolescence, peer relationships, and, more generally, normative aspects of intellectual, emotional, and social development.”⁴³

The experts found that the website’s virtually exclusive focus on what parents should say was not best suited to help parents influence their teens’ behavior. Key sections include “Talk to Your Teen,” “Talk Topics,” “Talk Tips,” and “Conversation Starters,”⁴⁴ and downloadable guides are entitled “Teen Chat” and “Parents, Speak Up!”⁴⁵ However, according to Dr. Santelli, parent-adolescent discussion alone is not likely to change teen behavior. He stated: “The scientific literature clearly suggests that merely promoting parent-adolescent communication is not likely to be a sufficient intervention in preventing sexual risk of pregnancy or [sexually transmitted infections], particularly if the only communication message is ‘Don’t have sex.’”⁴⁶

Dr. Santelli recommended that the site be expanded to include other types of advice for parents. He wrote: “Other examples of parent-adolescent interaction, such as limit-setting, clear values, and building a strong relationship — which have been shown to reduce adolescent risk taking behavior — are not well addressed.”⁴⁷ In similar comments, Professor Steinberg stated that “the goals of effective parenting are both to prevent problem behavior (which this website focuses on) and to facilitate positive psychological development (which this website generally ignores).”⁴⁸

The experts expressed concern that the website does not tailor advice to parents of youth of different ages. Professor Steinberg stated that “[a]lthough the website’s authors state that adolescence spans the period from about age 9 to age 18, the information presented as if the parent of the 9-year-old and the parent of an 18-year-old would approach issues in an identical way.”⁴⁹ He recommended that HHS “reorganize the website so that parents of children at

⁴² Letter from Laurence Steinberg, *supra* note 23.

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ 4parents.gov, Department of Health and Human Services (accessed on June 27, 2005) (online at <http://www.4parents.gov/index.html>).

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ Letter from John Santelli, *supra* note 21.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ Letter from Laurence Steinberg, *supra* note 23.

⁴⁹ *Id.*

different points of adolescent development can more easily access information relevant to their child's level of development."⁵⁰

With regard to the website's structure, Professor Steinberg commented that "there appears to be no rhyme or reason to the way in which the website's content is organized."⁵¹

The experts did praise several features of the website. For instance, Professor Steinberg wrote that "the basic material on effective styles of parenting and successful communication techniques is accurate and is presented in a way that many parents and other caregivers likely will find helpful." He also praised the handling of depression, anorexia, and bulimia.⁵²

I am enclosing the full reviews and detailed recommendations of the experts for your consideration.

Conclusion

The Department of Health and Human Services should be our nation's leading science-based cabinet-level agency. Under this Administration, however, a series of actions have led many to question whether ideology is trumping science at the Department. As a report I released last December revealed, the Department has funded abstinence-only programs that teach false and misleading facts to teenagers.⁵³ The agency has also stacked advisory committees,⁵⁴ altered HHS websites,⁵⁵ and censored scientific reports.⁵⁶ Leading scientific journals that have protested such actions include the *New England Journal of Medicine*,⁵⁷ *Lancet*,⁵⁸ *Nature*,⁵⁹ *Science*,⁶⁰ and many others.

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ Committee on Government Reform, minority staff, *The Content of Federally Funded Abstinence-Only Education Programs* (Dec. 2004).

⁵⁴ Committee on Government Reform, minority staff, *Politics and Science in the Bush Administration* (Aug. 2003).

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ Committee on Government Reform, minority staff, *A Case Study in Politics and Science: Changes to the National Healthcare Disparities Report* (Jan. 2004).

⁵⁷ Jeffrey M. Drazen, Jeffrey F. Greene, Alastair J.J. Wood, *FDA, Politics, and Plan B*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, 1561-2 (Apr. 8, 2004).

⁵⁸ *Keeping Scientific Advice Non-Partisan*, *Lancet*, 1525 (Nov. 16, 2002).

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Unfortunately, it appears that 4parents.gov is another example of the distortion of scientific information by the Department. The reviews of four leading experts found multiple inaccuracies and misleading assertions on the website. The content appears to have been guided by ideology, not a commitment to providing parents and teens reliable information about sex.

This approach is fundamentally misguided. Public health officials have an obligation to communicate accurate information about sex. A federally funded website should present the facts as they are, not as you might wish them to be. It is wrong — and ultimately self-defeating — to sacrifice scientific accuracy in an effort to frighten teens and their parents.

To help Congress understand how the website was created, I am requesting a copy of (1) the relevant HHS contract with the National Physicians Center for Family Resources; (2) any documents or communications that relate to the qualifications of the National Physicians Center for Family Resources or the decision to award the contract to this organization; (3) any communications between HHS and the National Physicians Center for Family Resources; and (4) any reviews, analyses, or evaluations of the 4parents.gov website or its content.

Most important, I urge you to take down 4parents.gov and build a web resource for parents that is designed by experts in the pertinent medical fields and backed by the best available scientific evidence.

Sincerely,



Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Minority Member

⁵⁹ *No Way to Run a Superpower*, *Nature*, 424 (Aug. 21, 2003)

⁶⁰ Donald Kennedy, *An Epidemic of Politics*, *Science*, 299 (Jan. 31, 2003).