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May 9, 2006

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

Dear Secretary Leavitt:

It has recently come to my attention that the Department of Health and Human Services directed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to make last-minute changes to the content of a key public health conference. I am writing to ask for an explanation of what occurred.

Just days prior to this week's national conference on sexually transmitted disease, the staff of a Republican member of Congress contacted the Department to complain that a session on abstinence-only education was "hostile" to abstinence-only programs. After this intervention, CDC replaced two panelists from the session, which had been approved through the conference's review process, with two abstinence-only advocates. Ironically, one of the panelists who was replaced had been scheduled to discuss a report I released that evaluated the accuracy of federally funded abstinence-only education.

In effect, it appears that presentations at a public health conference were censored because they criticized abstinence-only education. This attempt at thought control should have no place in our government.

The National STD Conference

The 2006 National STD (Sexually Transmitted Disease) Prevention Conference is sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and supported by the American Sexually Transmitted Disease Association, the American Social Health Association, and the National Coalition of STD Directors. Described by the CDC as "the only major U.S.

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conference that focuses exclusively on advances and challenges in efforts to halt the spread of STDs," the 2006 Conference began yesterday in Jacksonville, Florida.¹

All sessions for the conference went through a review process, including approval by an expert panel. Among the approved sessions was one that contained presentations that questioned the effectiveness of abstinence-only education. The session was titled "Are Abstinence-Only Programs a Threat to Public Health?" and it was to include the following presentations:

- "The Waxman Report" and "Federal Funding for Abstinence-Only and Its Impact on the States," by William Smith, Director of Public Policy for the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States;
- "Are Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs a Threat to Public Health?" by Dr. John Santelli, Columbia Mailman School of Public Health;
- "The Public Health Response to Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage in New Mexico," by Dr. Bruce G. Trigg, New Mexico Department of Public Health; and
- "Prevention and Politics: Understanding the Role of the State as an Actor in the Sex Education Policy Debate," by Maryjo M. Oster, Pennsylvania State University.²

This information was included in the official program for the conference.

Communications Between Congress, HHS, and CDC

On April 24, a staff person for Representative Mark Souder sent an email to the HHS Assistant Secretary for Legislation containing the program information for this session.³

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *2006 National STD Prevention Conference* (online at <http://www.cdc.gov/stdconference/>).

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Original Program Announcement. The stated "learning objectives" for the panel were: "Participants will be able to: -explain how abstinence-only-until-marriage programs threaten to undermine programs to control STDs and other public health programs and messages directed towards young people. -analyze the political and social context in which these federally funded programs operate."

³ Email from Michelle Gress to Office of the Assistant Secretary for Legislation, Department of Health and Human Services (Apr. 24, 2006).

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This email led to a series of communications from HHS to CDC and among CDC officials. By the next day, CDC officials, including several in the office of CDC Director Julie Gerberding, were discussing major changes to the session.⁴

As one official wrote, “we can either drop the symposium altogether or modify it to provide a more balanced perspective, such as the draft outline below.”⁵ The outline omitted the Smith and Oster presentations. In their place were talks on “A[bstinence] U[n]til M[arriage] programs: history and rationale” and “A[bstinence] U[n]til M[arriage] programs: program designs and promising data.”⁶ It was also proposed that the title of the session be changed from “Are Abstinence-Only Programs a Threat to Public Health?” to “Reproductive Health in Adolescents: the role of abstinence-until-marriage programs.”⁷

Further emails confirm that HHS had committed to changing the session within two days of the initial email. On April 26, Mr. Souder’s staff wrote again to the Office of the HHS Assistant Secretary for Legislation:

While “restructuring” the session to “balance” it out is positive in and of itself, the program as it is has already circulated. Maybe “restructuring” is inadequate in light of the hostile “advertising” against abstinence that has already been done. Can the session be postponed or replaced entirely?⁸

The Revised Panel

The revised session that now appears in the modified program is scheduled to occur today. It is titled “Public Health Strategies of Abstinence Programs for Youth,” and it is markedly different from the original.⁹

⁴ Internal CDC Email (April 25, 2006).

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Email from Michelle Gress to Office of the Assistant Secretary for Legislation, Department of Health and Human Services (Apr. 26, 2006).

⁹ National STD Prevention Conference Schedule (online at <http://cdc.confex.com/cdc/std2006/techprogram/S7569.HTM>) (accessed May 8, 2006).

As proposed in the emails, the session no longer includes the presentations by Mr. Smith or Ms. Oster. Instead, there are presentations by Dr. Patricia Sulak, the author of the “Worth the Wait” abstinence-only-until-marriage program, and Dr. Eric Walsh, also a support of abstinence-only education.¹⁰ Neither Dr. Sulak’s nor Dr. Walsh’s presentations went through the review process required of the other sessions in the conference. In addition, according to one account, HHS paid the travel expenses for these two presenters even though the expenses of other presenters were not covered.¹¹

While Dr. Santelli and Dr. Trigg were retained on the session, the titles of their presentations were changed. The name of Dr. Santelli’s presentation was changed from “Are Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs a Threat to Public Health?” to “Review of Literature and Evaluation Results.” The name of Dr. Trigg’s presentation was changed from “The Public Health Response to Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage in New Mexico” to “Opportunities and Challenges for State Programs.”¹²

The changes in the final session have been justified on the grounds that they provide “balance.” According to a conference organizer, however, the original session was chosen based on neutral scientific criteria, not a political agenda. Dr. Jonathan Zenilman, conference organizer and the president of the American Sexually Transmitted Diseases Association, said that the reason no abstinence-only advocates were selected for the initial panel was that no proposals were submitted that offered “credible data” on the effectiveness of such programs.¹³

Conclusion

This is not the first example of this Administration distorting scientific process related to reproductive health for ideological reasons. CDC has censored information about condom effectiveness; the Food and Drug Administration is indefinitely postponing a decision on emergency contraception; and scientists at the National Institutes of Health have been pressured not to do research on “controversial” subjects in human sexuality. The list of these cases is long and growing.

But the plenitude of such examples makes this one no less troubling. Public health conferences provide a crucial forum for scientific experts to present data, ponder unanswered

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Abstinence Debate Roils a Talk on STDs; CDC Organizers Say a Congressman Skirted Their Process. He Saw a Panel as Unfairly Tilted*, Philadelphia Inquirer (May 6, 2006).

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

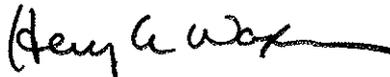
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questions, and enrich their own understanding of the field. Key to such exchange is the presence of a review process that applies objective criteria to submitted proposals. "Political correctness," whether from the right or the left, should not displace the scientific review process.

For these reasons, I request an explanation of why HHS and CDC censored the original session when faced with political pressure. In addition, I ask that you provide a copy of all communications within and between HHS and CDC regarding these changes. Finally, I ask for an assurance that in the future, decisions about the content of public health and medical conferences will be left to the CDC's scientists and their expert colleagues and not subjected to political litmus tests.

I request a response by June 1.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Henry A. Waxman", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Minority Member