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CONTACT: Laura Capps/Melissa Wagoner
(202) 224-2633

STATEMENT OF SENATOR EDWARD M. KENNEDY ON THE NOMINATION OF DR. JAMES W. HOLSINGER FOR SURGEON GENERAL

Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Hearing

The Committee meets this morning to consider the nomination of Dr. James W. Holsinger of Kentucky to be Surgeon General of the United States.

The Surgeon General is America's doctor. Few positions in government offer greater opportunity to improve the lives of so many citizens.

Past Surgeons General who have used their power well include Dr. C. Everett Koop's historic and dedicated fight against the country's AIDS epidemic; Dr. Luther Terry's ground-breaking report on smoking that increased the American peoples' concern about tobacco and led to a broad-based anti-smoking campaign; Dr. David Satcher's emphasis on the unacceptable racial and ethnic health disparities that continue to plague us.

Those are big shoes to fill. The next Surgeon General must be a strong champion of public health. At a time when the nation is deeply polarized on so many issues, we need someone who can unite Americans and who can be trusted by all. We must be confident that the Surgeon General will put public health first and leave politics and ideology behind.

As this week's testimony from former Surgeon General, Dr. Richard Carmona, showed, that standard has not been met – far from it. His testimony showed that the Office of the Surgeon General has become a morass of shameful political manipulation and distortion of science. Dr. Holsinger has a responsibility to provide strong assurances and a clear plan for seeing that these abuses are not repeated during his tenure, if he is confirmed.

Many of us are concerned about aspects of Dr. Holsinger's record that indicate that Dr. Holsinger has let his ideological beliefs cloud his scientific judgment. These concerns are serious at any time, but all the more so in light of Dr. Carmona's alarming testimony.

Many concerns were raised by a paper that Dr. Holsinger wrote in 1991, on homosexuality for a study committee of the Methodist Church. Dr. Holsinger wrote this paper from his perspective as a medical doctor and he drew on his medical training to analyze the scientific studies he cited. Yet as I read it, it cherry picks the science and is widely disputed scientifically. For example, I recently received a letter from 9 doctors highly respected in their fields, including 1 of the authors of the papers cited by Dr. Holsinger denouncing the 1991 paper as wholly unscientific, biased and incredibly poor scholarship. Indeed, Dr. William F. Owen, a co-author of one of the papers prominently cited in the 1991 paper stated recently that he was "particularly incensed that Dr. Holsinger misrepresented [his] paper, which was actually written to help physicians feel comfortable in dealing with gay patients."

Dr. Holsinger's paper is ideological and decidedly NOT an accurate analysis of the science then available on homosexuality. It is not even an accurate representation of the scientific papers, which it cites as authority. Dr. Holsinger's paper cherry picks and misuses data to support his thesis that homosexuality is unhealthy and unnatural. For example, a disproportionate amount of the data Dr. Holsinger relies on in his paper is pulled from emergency room and trauma studies-- which are not at all representative of the homosexual population as a whole.

Dr. Holsinger also artificially padded his paper's bibliography by adding citations to three sources that either had nothing to do with either homosexuality or actually directly refuted his paper's thesis.

This blatant misuse of science gravely concerns me and I need to hear from Dr. Holsinger himself that he will not similarly misuse his position to push his personal ideological beliefs over scientific research.

We know that Dr. Holsinger has strong personal views, as we all do, about homosexuality. Our country is involved in an important national conversation about it and we will continue to have that conversation.

We've heard reports of Dr. Holsinger's kindness toward people who are gays or lesbians. I have no reason to doubt any of these individual accounts of benevolence.

But as Surgeon General, Dr. Holsinger will be responsible for providing the best medical and scientific information to all Americans and we must be assured that he can do so free of interference from his personal views.

Dr. Holsinger brings with him a wealth of experience as Kentucky's former Secretary of Health Services and his 26 years of service to Veterans Administration. I have heard impressive comments about his work against smoking and his passion for ending childhood obesity. His colleagues at the University of Kentucky speak very highly of him. But we need to be confident that he is committed to decision-making based on sound science and good judgment.

The Surgeon General must be a person who can be an indisputable respected and trusted voice about the health, wellness and safety. The Surgeon General's message should be able to reach across the divisions that arise in a pluralistic society such as ours to educate, inform and protect all Americans. So, I welcome Dr. Holsinger, and I look forward to hearing from him.

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