AIDS lecture October 20, 1988
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Working With Persons With AIDS

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Presented to PHS Employees
Parklawn Building
Rockville, Maryland
October 20, 1988

It had been 17 days since I had last spoken in public on the AIDS epidemic.

The Public Health Service is composed of many agencies, such as NIH, FDA, CDC, etc., as well as the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health in which, at the time of this lecture, the Surgeon General also resided. The Parklawn Building in Rockville, Maryland is the largest single building that accommodates any portion of the Public Health Service and it is populated by civil servants, as well as those in the Commissioned Corps. Although individual offices are everything from habitable to luxurious, the building itself is not a commodious one and when it was opened there was tremendous grumbling, which included three cases of attempted arson and one suicide. Nevertheless, it is the largest collection of public health service employees and I was asked to speak to them, because in spite of the fact that we had known about AIDS now since June of 1981, and it was pretty clear to any intelligent person that you didn't catch AIDS at the workplace, there was still that constant gnawing feeling – fueled by the gainsayers – that maybe after all you could get AIDS at the worksite.

The calendar called for our annual recognition of awareness and sensitivity in regards to those of our relatives, friends, and co-workers that were handicapped and hence, the "excuse" for this meeting.

I starting by recounting my travel schedule around the country and the world and that most of the time, I was engaged in speaking to various audiences about the disease of AIDS – to health related groups, as well as others. The message was always the same and then I delivered it.

AIDS is not a disease affecting bodies and minds of a few thousands people, the numbers alone would lead a person to miss the real story of the disease, which had burrowed its way into the fabric of American life. Unless we recognized the extensive and permanent damage it could do, we would lose more than human lives; we'd lose the moral and ethical strength that had kept our nation together for over 200 years.

I stated that our job was two-fold: we had to do whatever we could to save individual human lives – and that meant education and prevention – and we had to save our sense of national unity and purpose.

I then reviewed the basic facts of the disease, its nature, its fatality, and its transmission. Our first priority was to fight the disease, not the people who had it. Our second was to get everyone educated about the disease so it would not spread. No one should use the fear of AIDS as a shield behind which to violate the ethics of medicine, of the omission of children from classrooms, the turning away of AIDS patients by a small segment of the health professions.

I delivered the message to employers all over the country and I made it clear that I was there that day to make sure the Public Health Service also got the message.

"Why talk about AIDS at the time we were acknowledging of the handicapped among us?" Because AIDS is "A handicapping disease", in terms of both the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987. This includes any physical or mental impairment, which substantially limits one or more of a person life's major activities. Second, a person may be infected with HIV, but show no clinical signs of AIDS and be able to function normally and adequately on the job. Third, it's federal employment policy, as well as the law, that HIV infected employees should be allowed to continue working. They do not pose a safety or health threat to themselves or others.

I then went into my usually litany of how one does not get AIDS, although I did it in a little different way than I might have elsewhere. I made it clear that I was asking nothing of the PHS that I was not asking of the entire country. We had always provided quality care for all of our citizens regardless of anything else, such as race, color, and etc., etc. The question then was if the disease would once again raise the artificial barriers between citizens that it took so long to tear down? We were a 200-year-old organization and we should not stumble and arrive unprepared for the challenges that were to follow.

It was the first time I had even mentioned AIDS as a handicapping disease and mentioned the law in that regard. Because of the nature of this "Heads-up" call to our own employees, no index is included.