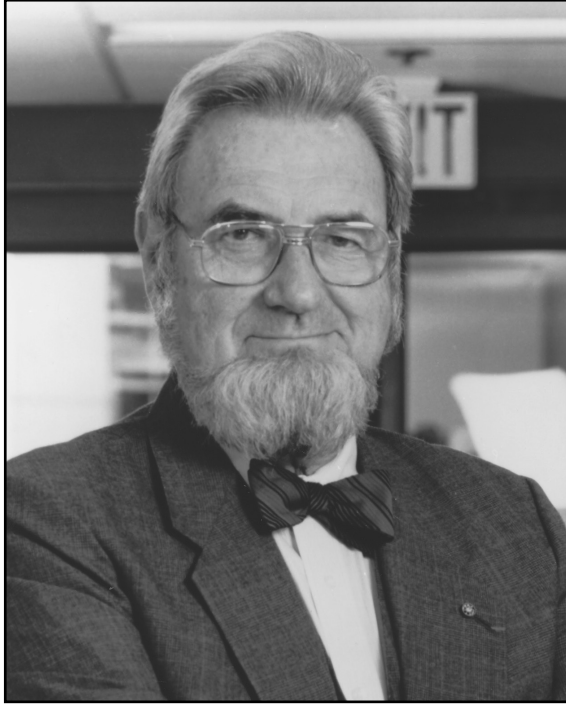

C. EVERETT KOOP



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CHARLES EVERETT KOOP, M.D., the 13th U.S. Surgeon General, died on 25 February 2013. The position of Surgeon General in the 1980s thoroughly tested and made transparent his bold, forthright, and principled approach to some of the most challenging health issues the nation has ever faced, including smoking, abortion, and HIV/AIDS. His curiosity, intellect, strong family ties, and faith all contributed to the well-known public figure of integrity he was to become as the “Nation’s doctor.” However, despite his extraordinary accomplishments during his tenure as Surgeon General, many people today may not be aware of his interesting and impressive history prior to assuming that position.

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Charles Everett Koop was born on 14 October 1916, in Brooklyn, New York. An only child, he grew up nurtured by a large, close-knit family. He and his parents shared their South Brooklyn home with his paternal grandparents, and his maternal grandparents and many aunts, uncles, and cousins lived in the neighborhood nearby. His father became assistant vice president at one of the nation’s largest banks; his mother was a business manager. Descended from Dutch and German immigrants, Koop claimed his background made him somewhat of an “oddball” at the public elementary and middle schools he attended, which primarily schooled children from Italian, Polish, and Jewish families. When he later attended a small private high school, the Flatbush School, he became editor of the school newspaper, played football, and expanded his circle of friends.

Koop’s attraction to medicine began early on. At age 6, he declared that he wanted to be a surgeon. Family influences kindled his interest. From his grandfathers—one an amateur engraver—he assimilated the desire to use his hands in his work. To develop the manual dexterity required of a surgeon, he practiced tying knots and cutting out pictures using both hands interchangeably. His mother taught him about anesthesia; in a role not uncommon for a layperson at that time, she administered anesthesia during at-home surgeries in their neighborhood, and by extension, she also anesthetized the stray cats and other small animals Koop operated on in the family basement. Koop himself was hospitalized following a childhood skiing accident, an experience that further fueled his interest in medicine.

In 1933, he began his higher education at Dartmouth College, where he majored in zoology. Tall and athletic, he enrolled in Dartmouth on a football scholarship but quit football after sustaining an eye injury that led his doctor to warn him that continuing the sport

might jeopardize his goal of becoming a surgeon. At Dartmouth he was given his nickname, "Chick." It was also at Dartmouth that he met Elizabeth (Betty) Flanagan, then a student at Vassar, the daughter of a doctor, and the woman who would later become his wife of nearly 70 years until her death in 2007.

MEDICAL SCHOOL AND HIS ACADEMIC CAREER AS A PEDIATRIC SURGEON

After graduating from Dartmouth, Koop returned to New York City in 1937 to attend Cornell University Medical College. A year later, he and Betty married, and in time they had four children: Allen, Norman, David, and Betsy, all born between 1944 and 1951. One of the great tragedies of his and Betty's lives was a climbing accident that, in 1968, took the life of their son David, who was a Dartmouth student at the time. Koop and Betty would later write about how their faith sustained them through this difficult period in their book, *Sometimes Mountains Move*.

Following his time at Cornell, Koop went on to establish a legendary career in academic medicine. When he finished his residency in surgery at the University of Pennsylvania, he was so skilled that he was appointed, at age 29, as the first Surgeon-in-Chief at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. He remained in that position for almost 35 years, during which time he helped establish the field of pediatric surgery through a series of brilliant accomplishments. He developed lifesaving surgical procedures for various difficult conditions, such as esophageal atresia, a congenital abnormality where the esophagus and the stomach are detached; hydrocephalus, in which cerebrospinal fluid collects in the skull; diaphragmatic hernias, which enable abdominal organs to push up through the diaphragm into the chest; and several other illnesses. He gained international recognition as the first surgeon to separate "Siamese" twins joined at the heart, and he even established the nation's first neonatal intensive care unit in 1956. Indeed, if he had just stopped there, he would have made his place in medical history. However, he was just getting started.

THE CALL TO BE SURGEON GENERAL

His work saving very young children with birth defects established his reputation as both a pediatric surgeon and a compassionate physician. Although he had been raised in a church-going family, he was not overly devout until he joined the Tenth Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia in 1948, at which time he began a spiritual reawakening. When

the U.S. Supreme Court's 1973 decision legalized abortion, Koop became outspoken about his fears that abortion not only devalued human life but that it also loosened moral restraints against killing other vulnerable members of society and would lead to infanticide and euthanasia. He authored a book on the issue and became even more widely known for his anti-abortion views through his 1978 collaboration on a multimedia project with the theologian Francis Schaeffer.

Through this exposure, he attracted the attention of Ronald Reagan, the then-newly elected president of the United States. In March 1981, a few months after taking office, President Reagan, an abortion foe, nominated Koop as U.S. Surgeon General. However, it would take 8 months of public controversy and rancorous Congressional hearings—with liberals and progressive women's groups squarely against him, and conservatives and anti-abortionists his staunch defenders—before he would be confirmed as Surgeon General. He began his tenure on January 21 of the following year.

It was during this time that I first met Chick. As a result of the stressful confirmation process, his blood pressure had risen, he could not sleep, and he was generally feeling terrible. At the time, I was a young physician at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and he was sent to me in my capacity as a clinical doctor, 2 years before I became director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) at the NIH. I remember well our first meeting and how humbled and honored I felt to assume the role as his personal physician.

Few people may know that he and I shared several connections that seemed destined to draw us together toward what evolved into a deep and enduring friendship. We both trace our family roots to Brooklyn, although he grew up in South Brooklyn and I come from the Bensonhurst section. Both of us became physicians after receiving medical degrees from Cornell—only he got his degree in 1941, 6 months after I was born.

After taking a careful medical history and giving him an extensive medical work-up, I offered him my diagnosis: "The Welcome-to-Washington Traumatic Stress Disorder." Once we realized it was nothing more serious, he was off and running.

THE NATION'S DOCTOR TAKES ON SMOKING AND HIV/AIDS

His two terms as Surgeon General were a remarkable period in U.S. public health history. When he entered the position, he headed an office that had little money or clout. By the time he left, the office still had little money, but he had become the nation's most influential doctor,

confounding his original critics and supporters alike by speaking truth to power and, in the process, profoundly transforming America's health.

Arguably, his most significant health initiative was his campaign against smoking. He had been in office just 1 month before he courageously challenged the powerful tobacco lobby, insisting that smoking kills and that it should be banned. He called cigarettes "the most important individual health risk in this country," claiming they were as addictive as heroin and cocaine. He railed against the dangers of second-hand smoke. His goal was to make America smoke-free by the year 2000. As a result of his vigorous and unapologetic campaign, by the time he left office in 1989, 40 states had restricted smoking in public, and the number of American adults who smoked had declined from 38% to 27%.

Koop stunned those who had thought he would use his position to advocate against abortion. Although personally opposed to abortion on religious grounds, after examining both sides of the issue, as Surgeon General he avowed that abortion was a moral rather than public health issue. He resisted formidable pressure from politicians and constituents who wanted him to declare abortion a substantial health risk to women undergoing the procedure.

As Surgeon General, Koop pursued several other important issues as well, including advocating for the medical rights of babies born with birth defects. However, it was on the subject of HIV/AIDS that his extraordinary strength of character shone, as he courageously steered the country away from several years of silence, complacency, and irrational fear and opened up a national dialogue on the issue.

The Surgeon General's living quarters was a house on the NIH campus. Soon after I became Director of NIAID in 1984, Koop would often drop by my office, just across the lawn from his house, in the evenings on his way home. He wanted to learn about HIV and AIDS, and we spent many hours in my office discussing the topic. A little-known but true story is how he struggled to publish the 1986 Surgeon General's Report on AIDS after years of being prohibited from speaking out on the subject. He was not an AIDS physician, but he passionately wanted to get it right—and he did. The report contained straightforward language urging the use of condoms for safe sex and advocating sex education for young children.

Then in 1988, he put together the congressionally mandated information brochure on AIDS. It was to be mailed to all 107 million U.S. households. However, some government officials tried to undermine this effort by vetting the document but withholding the funds to send it out. These officials did not know that he and I were already close

friends. I arranged an interagency agreement that transferred a relatively small amount of money from the NIAID, which was increasingly supporting research on this newly recognized disease, to his office. As a result, the brochure got mailed out. So began a much more honest public discussion about human sexuality and the risk of HIV infection.

Koop resigned as Surgeon General in 1989, but he continued to be a leading figure in public health for decades afterward. And during this time, our friendship grew even stronger. One day, we were both in New York City to attend a Cornell University Medical College alumni function. For a few hours, we took off in his rented limousine to visit our old Brooklyn neighborhoods. We concluded the trip by stopping off for hot dogs at Nathan's on Coney Island. I will never forget the look on the faces of the people in front of Nathan's who could not help but recognize the imposingly tall man with bushy sideburns, wire-rimmed glasses, and a gray Captain Ahab beard.

Following the death of his first wife, Chick remarried in 2010 to a fellow member of his church, Cora Hogue. He died at his home in Hanover, New Hampshire, at age 96.

I feel greatly privileged to have been both a close friend and public health colleague of Dr. C. Everett "Chick" Koop. Many people have commented to me over the years that because of positions he outspokenly championed during his time as Surgeon General, he must have been an "unpredictable" person. On the contrary, under very difficult circumstances, I found him to have an inner moral compass that was both wise and remarkably constant. By following this compass, he was extraordinarily predictable in that he faithfully advocated for what was just, decent, and appropriate for the health of the nation. This is his legacy for which we all can be grateful.

Elected 1992

ANTHONY S. FAUCI

Director

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

National Institutes of Health

REFERENCE

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