

Commencement Address  
By  
C. Everett Koop, MD, ScD  
Surgeon General  
US Public Health Service  
And  
Deputy Assistant Secretary For Health  
Presented to the 1985 graduation Class of  
Rockville, MD High School  
At Constitution Hall, Washington, DC  
June 10, 1985

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A large percentage of the children of folks who work in the Public Health Service when they come of high school age, attend the Rockville High School, and it would have been very difficult to turn down their invitation to be their commencement speaker especially when they said, "We believe that the Rockville High School students, staff, and community will benefit by your presence at the commencement." They also referred to me as the government's "chief medical spokesman", and so I made my appearance there not only as that, but also as a very proud neighbor - proud of the accomplishments of the high school, and proud of their attitude about hope and optimism about the future. I suggested that I would limit my talk to the challenge of moving ahead - with optimism - in today's world.

I acknowledged that it was not an easy place for any of us, that the daily papers and the TV news were downright discouraging, and if there is some method that we may adopt to help each other fight off such discouragement, we should, and I'd like to talk about that tonight. The first part of my talk was centered on who I am, what I stand for, what I care about, and whom I care about. I talked in a jocular vein of what I did when I was in my office in Rockville, Maryland; I'm stamping out warnings on millions of packages of cigarettes, which led me into a very good short talk on the statistics and dangers of smoking. I was even bringing them up-to-date in saying that the R. J. Reynolds purchase of Nabisco Company showed that even they knew there was a big future in cookies, but not just any future in cigarettes. Knowing that smoking is the leading preventable cause of death in this society, I didn't feel that it was improper to spend a good amount of my time talking to this vulnerable group about that very subject.

Then I surprised them all by talking not about things like drunk driving where the message is so easy - "Don't!" but instead I talked about pregnancy, childbirth and parenting. I realized that this might be the furthest thing from their minds, but that inasmuch as they all had the potential to be parents -- statistics showed that 70% of them would have one or more children within the next 20 years. It seemed pertinent to discuss it. From my point of view, it was essential that they hear the message about early and consistent prenatal care that healthy mothers and healthy babies make a healthy society, and then I turned to the role of the father during pregnancy. His attitude has a lot to do with the mother's decision to get good prenatal care. I wasn't taking either an anti-

feminist or pro-feminist point of view. I just reminded them that new parents are much better parents if they work at parenting together. Where the father is absent, or uninvolved, or where he is unsure of himself and the role he has to play – in those circumstances we see pregnant women under stress, higher health risks for them and their babies, and having more troublesome deliveries. Good fathering is crucial to maternal, infant and child health as is good mothering.

I then contrasted the money we pour into schools of medicine and nursing, and the funds we provide for tuition and laboratory fees for students when healthful behavior, and thoughtful, careful attitudes are really what count. When that becomes universally true, then my concern about smoking will no longer exist.

I closed with the optimistic note that I thought we were headed in that direction and with the help of everyone there that evening, young and old alike, we could certainly make it.

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Birthrate in America  
Childbirth  
Future of cookies vs. future of tobacco  
Health risk of smoking  
I am your Surgeon General & your neighbor  
Investment in one's own health & well-being  
Parenting  
Parenting together  
Pregnancy  
Prenatal care  
Risk of pregnancy  
Role of the father during pregnancy  
Smoking  
The avoidance of discouragement  
The challenge of moving ahead in today's world  
The prevalence of smoking in America  
The value of life  
Who you are

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Principal DeBalso  
Mr. Guckes, Class President  
Mr. Hagy, Class Sponsor  
Nabisco  
R. J Reyonlds