The Way We Live Now: Jocelyn Elders

Former Surgeon General

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Q: It's been four years since your ouster as surgeon general. How do you assess President Clinton's response to AIDS since then?

A: A lot has been accomplished since then—but not by the Clinton administration. We have reduced deaths, and we may want to pat ourselves on the back for that, but that's due to the new drugs. As far as slowing HIV infections, we haven't made a dent.

The thing the Clinton administration really could have done is made clean needles available. It wouldn't have cost them money—it would have saved money! It didn't even require legislation. And it would have saved lives. But they didn't want to be accused of being soft on drugs. I'm very disappointed in that. They're selling out our young people to the political right.

Q: What else should Clinton and company be doing about AIDS?

A: They should tailor their message to fit the communities of highest need. The recent legislation that gave $156 million to black communities was a good step, but in proportion to the need, it was just a drop in the bucket. It was more a way to pacify than to really make a difference. But we can't blame everything on the administration. Until we as a community, we as the black church, we as black people decide whether we're going to save our young people, we're going to have to suck it up and take it.

Q: A national pediatric group recently recommended that HIV ed become a high school requirement. What are your thoughts?

A: We have to educate people about HIV disease long before they graduate from high school–long before. We have to do it in elementary school. And I don't think you can talk about AIDS without talking about sex. Yet that's what they want you to do, come in and talk about AIDS, but don't say a word about sex.

Q: If you could get the president, the health secretary, the surgeon general and the AIDS czar in one room, what would you say?

A: I would say, Each of you take your programs and put all the funding together to create a comprehensive program for the schools—and then get out of the way. They're spending billions fighting a drug war that we can't win. They're spending billions on separate programs of tobacco education, drug education, nutrition education. They need to find a quiltmaker. If we're serious about access to health care for all citizens, about preventing disease, not just intervening in illness, serious about reducing the problems related to sexuality, STDs and teen pregnancy, then we'll do what we must do to prevent those problems.

Now might be a good time to get things like this done. All of Washington argued about sex for a year—now they need to be able to go home and say, Look what we accomplished.

Q: Has the impeachment scandal made it harder to talk about sex?

A: It makes it an awful lot easier. We talk about things now that we never talked about before. I got fired for talking about masturbation—now anyone can say *masturbation*, even at dinner parties. We have to talk about it now because our children are asking about it.

And if the president's not comfortable talking about it, he has many people in his administration who can. He should get them out there talking about it, and then support what they say.

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