Koch vs. Koop

Two legacies reveal opposite responses to the epidemic.

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When AIDS first surfaced in the early 1980s, Ed Koch was mayor of New York City and C. Everett Koop was surgeon general of the United States. Both men died this year, and their obituaries tell of two responses to the crisis.

Koop went against conservative leadership and authored the brochure “Understanding AIDS,” which included clear and frank language about condoms, anal sex and intravenous drug use; in 1988, it was mailed to all U.S. households (over 100 million). And Koch? As AIDS journalist David France wrote in New York magazine: “Administratively, he created inter-departmental committees and appointed liaisons, but he gave them neither power nor resources to do anything real.” In short, “Koch stood silent through years of headlines, obituaries and deaths.”

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