

JOINT STATEMENT ON THE NOMINATION OF DR. ELDERS

September 2, 1993

National Press Club, Washington, D.C.

The nomination of Dr. Joycelyn Elders to be Surgeon General is not something that any of us can take lightly. While some of us are primarily disturbed by the substance of her positions, and others are primarily disturbed by the tone of her remarks, all of us agree that Dr. Elders has a record that is profoundly troubling. We feel confident that if the American people knew as much about Dr. Elders as we do that they would surely share our convictions.

Dr. Elders believes that the best way to combat teenage pregnancies is to freely distribute condoms to public school students. But the evidence is not supportive of this approach. Under her tenure as director of the Arkansas Health Department, the teen pregnancy rate rose by 12 percent in the 11 Arkansas counties that had school-based clinics. What is most striking about this figure, however, is that it was a complete turn-around: in the period just prior to Dr. Elders' tenure, the teen pregnancy rates had actually declined. Indeed, one of the reasons why the condom-giving approach failed in Arkansas was that a large portion of the condoms were defective. Dr. Elders knew this to be true yet inexplicably continued the distribution program.

Now consider, for a moment, what would happen if a candidate for a position in the Department of Defense knew that the missile system that he had trumpeted had already proven to be a failure, and that, worse still, many of the missiles had in fact been shown to be defective. Is there any wonder what would happen to his nomination?

Just as troublesome is the cavalier attitude that Dr. Elders exhibits towards condoms: "I tell every girl that when she goes out on a date, put a condom in her purse." Now that may pass as responsible in some quarters, but most parents, we believe, would agree with us that that it is the wrong message to send to adolescents, many of whom are struggling to practice a degree of restraint.

Even more objectionable, however, is the following comment, made by Dr. Elders on April 2, 1993: "We have had driver's ed for our kids. We've taught them what to do in the front seat of the car, but not what to do in the back seat of the car." It would be instructive to know who should be teaching what technique to these youngsters. The much reputed "condom plant" that Dr. Elders proudly displays in her office suggests that whatever method is taught, no lesson will be complete without a "how-to" session on the proper application of condoms.