

U.S. SURGEON GENERAL CALLS ABC BOOKLET ON  
TELEVISION VIOLENCE "AN EMBARRASSMENT TO  
THE SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH COMMUNITY AS  
WELL AS TO THE MEDIA"

Remarks from an address by C. Everett Koop, MD, on  
"Understanding Family Violence," April 26, 1983

There is an influence in our society that has gained rather easy access to the families of America. It is television. And, using the terms of the definition I offered a few minutes ago, I think television has to a great extent violated the trust that forms the basis of that access.

In 1972, The Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior published its now famous report called Television and Growing up: The Impact of Televised Violence. Dr. Jesse Steinfeld was the Surgeon General at the time and he deserves to be remembered for his leadership in this project.

The 1972 report concluded with the unanimous feeling among the committee that "there is a convergence of the fairly substantial, experimental evidence for a short-run causation of aggression among some children by viewing violence on the screen." It was a cautious but no less significant statement at that time.

The committee also concluded, with even more caution, that there was "much less certain evidence from field studies that extensive violence-viewing precedes some long-run manifestations of aggressive

behavior." The committee acknowledged, in what might be called a "traditional coda," that "A great deal of research remains to be done."

That report stimulated a great deal of research activity by government and by the academic community into the relationship between T.V. viewing and violence. In fact, of all the published research on the influence of T.V. in this country, better than 80 percent of the work has been done in the last 10 years.

In late 1979, Surgeon General Julius Richmond asked the National Institute of Mental Health to take a critical look at the volume of research that had appeared since the 1972 report. Heading the project was Dr. David Pearl, Chief of the Behavioral Sciences Research Branch at N.I.M.H.. The new findings were published in 1982 in a two-volume report titled Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties.

Earlier this month, Dr. Pearl was invited to Capitol Hill to testify on the subject of "Crime and Violence in the Media." He told Chairman William Hughes and other members of The House Subcommittee on Crime that the 1982 report showed "that the convergence of findings from a sizable number of studies, on balance, supported the inference of a causal connection between televised violence and later aggressive behavior." Dr. Pearl said that "The conclusions reached in the 1972 Surgeon General's Report thus have been strengthened by the more recent research..."

What has particularly depressed me is the fact that the major networks did not rise to the challenge of the 1972 report and, in fact, have resisted the implications of the 1982 report. Further, one network,

A.B.C., published a pamphlet earlier this year that tries to refute the conclusions of the 1982 report. It does not succeed.

I won't take your time today with a dreary recital of the research that points such a direct and accusing finger at television programming for the baggage of violence and aggressive behavior it delivers every day to the homes and families of America. Nor will I rummage through the dreadful basket of alleged research analyses done by A.B.C. Their pamphlet is an embarrassment to the social science research community as well as to the media.

But I think it is time for the networks and for individual stations to be candid with themselves and with the American people. They dwell far too much on the dark side of human nature for a number of unpardonable reasons: it is sensational...it is easy to do...it can be done quickly and cheaply by writers and producers of little talent...and requires no sympathetic knowledge of human spirit.

Oddly enough, I think the greatest success of T.V. -- "M\*A\*S\*H" -- also demonstrated how poverty-stricken television is for talent and decency, since there is no other program like it...unless you count re-runs of "M\*A\*S\*H." But here is a series that has gone on for years... that remains exceptionally popular...and yet it demonstrates clearly, week after week, a distaste for violence, a sympathetic attitude toward the victims of violence of whatever race, and a preference for individuals who have the capacity to care for another human being. And the American viewing audience loved it.

But "M\*A\*S\*H" took only one half-hour in about 120 hours of T.V. each week. I just wish that the networks would spend more of their resources to improve on that ratio and less of their resources

foolishly attacking a respectable piece of research analysis by N.I.M.H. Isn't that a shame? I think it is.

That's all I want to say about that. But I think we need to be on the record for it. The N.I.M.H. studies are good ones and I support the work they do. And I appeal to our friends in the media to take a second look at their programming and then ask themselves, "Are we helping the American family avoid violence and defend itself from abuse, or are we pandering to those destructive instincts?"