

## Top health official who urged abstinence says views changed

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NEW YORK – The head of the nation’s top public health agency once opposed condoms and needle exchange programs as ways to stop the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

Last week, in one of his first media interviews since taking office, Dr. Robert Redfield Jr. said his views have changed.

“I think the data is just clear that these strategies work. When you see evidence that these strategies work, you need to embrace them,” said Redfield, director of the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Redfield, 66, rose to prominence as a top researcher into the emerging AIDS epidemic. He has earned praise for his extensive experience treating HIV patients as well as drug addicts.

But he also made headlines more than two decades ago when he was scrutinized for overstating the effectiveness of an experimental AIDS vaccine. And he was criticized for being out of step with the public health community on some issues.

In a 1987 booklet on AIDS aimed at young people, Redfield and his co-author offered no advice on condoms or other preventive measures, preaching that the best way to avoid AIDS was to avoid sex until marriage. They wrote, in all caps: “DON’T ENGAGE IN INTIMATE CONTACT AT ALL. IF YOU HAVE HAD THAT KIND OF CONTACT IN THE PAST, STOP NOW.”

The booklet came out at a time when prominent public health leaders, including U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, endorsed condoms as one way of preventing the spread of the AIDS virus.

In a foreword to a 1990 book entitled “Christians in the Age of AIDS,” Redfield wrote: “It is time to reject the temptation of denial of the AIDS/HIV crisis; to reject false

prophets who preach the quick-fix strategies of condoms and free needles; to reject those who preach prejudice; and to reject those who try to replace God as judge.”

Research showing needle-exchange programs work emerged in the 1990s.

“Science evolves,” Redfield said.

Until this year, Redfield sat on the board of Children’s AIDS Fund International, an organization that has long prioritized abstinence before marriage in preventing the spread of HIV.

Redfield told The Associated Press it has become clear to him that condoms and needle exchanges work as part of comprehensive programs to stop the spread of certain infectious diseases.

“One thing I can commit to is **CDC** is not an opinion organization. It’s a science- based, data-driven organization,” he said.

The **CDC** investigates disease outbreaks, researches the cause and frequency of health problems, and promotes prevention. It has nearly 12,000 employees and 10,000 contractors worldwide.

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