

AMA House of Delegates
Speech on the family
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It is a great honor for me to meet today with leaders of your profession.

I would suggest that it is not unusual in one way that we are meeting together, a lawyer and physicians, because in a sense our respective professions have very much in common. We each have in our respective fields a body of history, a body of knowledge, and a requirement of continuing education that stands behind the values of our profession.

We have a mission, and that is to help others. And particularly, each of our professions has been engaged in helping those less fortunate in our society by making sure that no one is denied either medical or legal assistance when they need it.

Each of our callings also carries with it tremendous professional and civic responsibility. As a result of our great responsibilities, each of our professions is profoundly and properly dependent on and guided by a sturdy sense of ethics.

Your professional ethics were first stated succinctly by the Athenian physician Hippocrates. His statement has been considered sufficiently definitive to become the normative oath of the modern medical profession.

Today I would like to draw your attention to the first principle of that Hippocratic Oath, one that is expressed in the Latin version as "Primum, non nocere." As you know, that means "First, do no harm." This principle, which I know is the bedrock of your profession, would also make a good motto for the federal government.

This is precisely an issue that I would like to discuss today in light of some recent policy efforts that our Administration — and particularly the Domestic Policy Council, which I chair — has been working on. As a matter of fact, last Tuesday, President Reagan spent an hour with us going over the report which forms the basis of the policy I will discuss today.

We have been receiving a number of policy reports as we prepared the agenda for the last two years of President Reagan's Administration, but the one that I think should be of special interest to you, both personally and professionally, is a report entitled "The Family: Preserving America's Future."

Hippocrates' words were brought home to us in a very important way as we read this report. For as we looked at the public policies that have dealt with the family in this country over the past 20 years or so, it was clear that somebody should have been saying, "Wait a minute: first, do no harm!"

The sad fact is that many of the policies emanating from Washington in recent decades from all three branches of government — despite being well-meant and well-intentioned in most cases — have not helped and in some instances have hurt the family unit.

Now, as I said, most of these policies had unobjectionable goals; indeed, many even had noble ones. But the fact is that too many have had unintended consequences. In some cases, the deleterious side effects were felt only after these policies were implemented, and particu-

larly at the level where they directly impeded or affected families. But in others, the problems could have been detected much earlier at the planning level as well.

In any case, the net result has frequently not been good for the American family. Even today there is a danger that much of the talk about the American family merely adopts the rhetoric of the pro-family movement in this country to justify policies advanced by social engineers that would call upon the government to intervene in more and more very personal relationships.

Some of this talk is actually of the kind that we heard a great deal of in the late '70s, and I would suggest that it is nothing more than an attempt to re-define the family.

For example, one leading sex education professional has defined the family as any two or more people, one of whom is an adult. Well, I would suggest that such a minimalist definition of the family, which ignores both the concept and the values of the traditional family as we have known it, fails to express that most basic building block of our civilization, upon which there is agreement among otherwise very different cultures over wide expanses of time.

Now, let me say at the outset that it is certainly not my purpose here to condemn other forms of domestic association that may exist, nor to condone callousness towards those who must discharge family responsibilities in circumstances that often fall tragically short of the ideally structured family.

However, I do think it appropriate to clarify and vindicate the traditional understanding of the family, and to show that the family has often been the victim rather than the beneficiary of much supposedly compassionate social policy.

In a way, our recent tampering with the family is not new. Intellectual fads dedicated to making up alternatives to the family have come and gone over the 200 years of our existence as a nation. Almost always, these ideas have had at their core an expanded role for government.

The assumption behind these ideas seems always to be that families are somehow a primitive form of social organization that enlightened policy can transcend and improve upon. But I would suggest the contrary: recent anthropology suggests that the family is a pre-condition for any society's rise from poverty to a higher level of social values and social organization.

George Gilder, in his ground-breaking book "Wealth and Poverty," sets forth the evidence for the superior wealth-gathering potential of families, and particularly, of married men. As he notes, a married man is spurred by the claims of family to channel his otherwise disruptive aggressions into his performance as provider for wife and children.

Well, a corollary of this is that economic growth and the rule of law begin when people acquire long-term responsibilities towards others to whom they are intimately bound. Such civilized institutions as law and commerce tend to remain dormant when there are no such commitments, and they tend to become dormant again when "society" or some other abstract collectivity is substituted for the family.

For at least since Aristotle wrote his "Politics," we have known both philosophically and practically that the family is the basic unit of human experience and of our civilization.

Yet the family has been a target for well-meaning but often misguided people who would substitute government expertise (as they think of it) for individual judgment. For example, in

1971, Congress passed a measure that was described in such lofty terms as “establishing a full range of health, education and social services” that supposedly were essential to the achievement of the full potential of the nation’s children.

As one senator charged, the bill would have made the federal government the “arbiter of child-rearing practices in the United States, providing and producing a race of docile automata.”

The measure was vetoed by the President at that time, who said that he was refusing to approve it because it “would commit the vast moral authority of the federal government to the side of communal approaches to child-rearing as against a family-centered approach.”

Well, I think President Nixon in 1971 was right about that, and I think the same can be said about later measures that were enacted, including a measure that was designed for a good purpose but is inadequate in terms of its impact on the family, and that is the child care credit.

As presently administered, this tax advantage is available exclusively to parents who utilize some form of day-care while both of them are working outside the home, or to one-parent families while that parent is working outside the home. Now, I think it is a good thing that day-care is available and that the tax credit provides for that. But why discriminate in decision-making between parents? Why should not the tax credit also be available not only to those parents who work outside the home, but also — in a value-neutral context — to a parent who chooses to stay at home and take care of the children himself or herself? Why should we have the government decide which choice it should be?

Sometimes harm is done by policies that merely fail to consider the family, thereby treating the government and the individual as the only actors in the political system. For example, our welfare system too often — truly for humanitarian reasons — makes higher benefits available to individuals raising children without a spouse. Such children do indeed face greater hardship, but the effect on poor families is to provide strong pressure against keeping the two-parent family intact.

Then when the children of such destroyed families grow up and need jobs but lack the good work habits traditionally inculcated by families, the government then has to turn around and spend millions of dollars more on so-called job training programs. They forget that families used to teach good work habits for free, and could still do so, and in many cases, still do.

There is much good work going on in the private sector to assist families. I understand your organization is going to be considering in this session a new initiative focused on promoting adolescent health, and I certainly commend you for that. In particular, you will be looking at the role the medical profession can play in confronting the problems of substance abuse among teenagers.

I certainly applaud these efforts of your organization and of your whole profession in what you are doing to spread awareness of how bad alcohol and drug abuse are for young people, and how such abuse can threaten their lives and their futures.

May I respectfully turn your attention to the problems of teenage sexuality and pregnancy, another matter which I know is of great concern to you as professionals? And here I would urge you to consider the role of families in providing guidance to young people and keeping them out of trouble.

Merely providing information and contraceptives is, at best, of limited value. Indeed, in the past 16 years, teenage pregnancy rates have soared even as sex education and family planning programs have mushroomed, often with federal support.

I would hope that in your work there is one highly relevant question that you might ask, and that is: Among teenagers who manage to stay out of trouble, what is the reason? And I suspect you might find that kids who act responsibly often do so because of loving yet firm parents who teach them right from wrong.

Another reason that has to be thought of — although certainly not in the province of government — is the matter of religion, which is one of the most effective yet least noticed of all the factors that instill a sense of self-worth and a sense of the worth of others in our young people.

Well, these trends that I have been describing show that in the past 20 or 25 years, government has increasingly tried to do what families have traditionally done: feed children, make young people employable, prevent reckless and promiscuous sexual behavior. But government has been doing it not in a way that supplements, but too often in a way that supplants the influence of the family. Such policies, however well intentioned, can only mean harm to the family and ultimately to our society.

In this regard, it is not just Congress or an over-ambitious executive branch that has tried to do this: the judicial branch has also been involved. This is particularly true in a series of decisions that have been made over the past several years concerning welfare.

Occasionally, state governments, recognizing the desirability of promoting family values, have tried to make corrections in the anti-family thrust of some welfare programs, such as I described earlier. But in 1973, the Supreme Court in the case of *New Jersey Welfare Rights Organization v. Cahill*, unfortunately struck down a New Jersey welfare plan that provided, in giving aid to a family, that the children in that family either be born in wedlock or else legally adopted.

The Court held that such a presumption in favor of family stability, even for the purpose of encouraging just such stability which the poor desperately need, was a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment.

A similar case took place, also in 1973, involving the United States Department of Agriculture. The issue here was the food stamp program. Congress had accepted its responsibility and had placed a clearly pro-family intention in this program, specifying that food stamps could be distributed only to households where members were related. The Supreme Court also struck down this restriction.

With regard to abortion: a difficult topic to be sure, but there again, the pattern has been equally clear. In the *Planned Parenthood v. Danforth* case in 1976, the Court held that a father has little if any legal interest in whether his offspring is aborted or not. And in a 1979 case the Court held that states cannot require the consent of both parents for an abortion that is performed on a minor.

Apparently, on the one hand, the abortion decision is deeply personal; but at the same time, those closest to the woman involved — either her parents in the case of minors, or the father of her child — are held by law to have no say in the matter. The very least one can say about this reasoning is that it leaves the family almost completely out of this realm of what we call personal decisions.

I recognize that on many of these issues, reasonable minds and people of good will can and do differ. I would suspect that in this body here today we would find a number of differing opinions of these subjects. But our concern is not that we all uniformly arrive at the same conclusion, but rather, that we pay attention to human history and common sense, and that our bureaucracy, as well as our judiciary and our Congress, must take care not to be in the position of at best ignoring and at worst attacking the traditional rights and privileges of the family.

Margaret Mead once observed: “No matter how many communes anybody invents, the family always creeps back.” Well, I would suggest that today there are encouraging signs beginning to appear on the horizon that Margaret Mead’s observation is correct.

For one thing, in the recent tax reform measure advanced by our Administration and passed by the Congress, we have initiated a long overdue process of raising the dependent exemption to \$2,000, so that each family will have more income that they can keep for the support of the family unit. This is a very important first step towards recognizing the financial burdens that traditional families face, as well as appreciating their effectiveness as primary sources of social welfare.

There is a wholesome change under way in popular attitudes as well. Look at one particular example from the realm of popular culture. In the late '60s, the Beatles took some very anti-establishment and anti-family postures. They even had a song that was entitled “Piggies,” which made fun of the conventional middle-class family.

I have had a little help from my children in interpreting just what these songs meant, but in any event, Beatles star John Lennon, shortly before his death in 1980, took a somewhat different approach. He wrote a very different kind of song. It was called “Beautiful Boy,” and it celebrated his and his wife’s love for their little son, and their parental role towards him.

Now, I suspect it might be a little far-fetched to claim John Lennon as a champion of traditional family values. But nevertheless, perhaps this makes it all the more significant that he eventually learned, as his song shows, the joys of parenthood and the importance of family.

Government can’t create joy like that. It can’t even do very much to enhance it. The best that government can do in order to help families is to respect them and to refrain from impeding them.

That’s really the essence of the Domestic Policy Council’s report on the family. There is a lot more to it in terms of particular issues. There is a lot of research that is represented there. But actually, what it concludes is this: Sound family policy in the United States is not really a policy in itself, but rather a criterion by which to judge other policies.

So many of the goals that we share as a nation — greater prosperity, lower unemployment, less substance abuse, an improved level of health, fewer unwanted teenage pregnancies, and so on — can be furthered by intact, caring, mutually supportive families. The breadwinners who work very hard to provide for their children, the savings pool that helps to create jobs, the parents who teach kids respect for their bodies and respect for each other — these are the fruits of solid families.

If we let harm be done to them, then harm will also be done to all of those goals about which there is, I would suggest, almost unanimous agreement as to where our country ought to be going.

So in concluding, I'd like to ask you to think through these various policy issues that we confront with the family clearly in mind. I don't know of any group that is in a better position to do something about improving the position of the American family, because of your personal relationship with your patients and the advice you give, as well as your positions of civic responsibility and civic leadership.

Confronted with any proposed policy of government, confronted with proposals that come before us, together we should ask: Does it help, or does it hurt, the family? If it harms it, then it will probably harm society as a whole, because a sound family policy means making the motto "First, do no harm" the watchword for all attempts by government to promote the general welfare.

The medical profession — a venerable calling if ever there was one — has a role to play. Not, obviously, as an agent of government, far from it; but as a vital part of the social fabric that government so often intrudes upon.

Naturally you are — as the current expression goes — health care providers. That's government-ese for physicians. But you are also valued counselors to patients. You are also scientists, and so you are able to draw inferences from evidence. Therefore, you can infer empirically the good that families do, and as physicians, you can encourage family cohesiveness as a vital part of your healing message, as well as a vital part of your mission for a better society for all Americans.

Thank you.