

Doctor's Orders

Interview by DEBORAH SOLOMON

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As the United States surgeon general, you just released a report on tobacco smoke that claims, not completely convincingly, that one puff of one cigarette can trigger inflammation and a fatal [heart attack](#). Is that intended as a slogan?

Well, it's more than a slogan. The scientific basis is that tobacco smoke is a toxic mix of more than 7,000 chemicals and chemical compounds. When you inhale the smoke, the chemicals can reach your lungs very quickly and enter the bloodstream. Whether it's secondhand smoke or if it's from a cigarette, it damages the lining of the blood vessels; it makes your blood more likely to clot.

As the nation's chief health educator, have you ordered President Obama to [quit smoking](#)?

I cannot order the president. However, because he's been trying really hard, I encourage him to keep it up. I want to encourage him and other people to quit because we tend to villainize them, and it's not always their fault.

It's amazing how many people have quit smoking in the past generation.

Since 1964, our rate of [smoking](#) in the U.S. has been cut in half.

Have you ever used marijuana?

No, I've never used it. I was a good Catholic girl growing up.

What do you think of its medical use?

There's evidence that shows that it's useful for medicine, but we need to investigate how to avoid the adverse effects of smoking marijuana.

In the summer of 1990, you founded a now-famous clinic in Bayou La Batre, a shrimping village in your native Alabama where you ministered to the health needs of impoverished residents.

I learned that people worked for a living and didn't have [health insurance](#). But they would pay what they could.

Your clinic was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina and rebuilt in short order. In 2008, you won a MacArthur award. I assume you are still receiving installments of your \$500,000 grant?

Actually, no. When I accepted this government position — they can't give money to a government employee, so I had to stop.

While running the clinic, you watched your older brother and only sibling die of [AIDS](#). How did he contract it?

My brother was gay, and he was part of the gay community, and many of his friends contracted the disease. It was hard, because he and his friends were so vibrant, such bright energetic people who were contributing to the world.

How old was your brother when he died?

He was 44. It was diagnosed; he lived eight months, and he died about a year before my mother died. She was actually diagnosed with her lung [cancer](#) six weeks after his death. I think she died of a broken heart.

You were raised by your mom, after your parents separated. Did your mother work?

She was a housewife, but she also did hair. She was a cosmetologist.

Were you the first person in your family to go to medical school?

Yes. I had never seen a black doctor before I went to college.

When you were nominated for surgeon general, your critics tried to disqualify you on the basis of your weight, saying you were perpetuating [obesity](#) rather than battling it.

My thought is that people should be healthy and be fit at whatever size they are.

What sort of exercise do you recommend for people who don't love it?

I want exercise to be fun; don't want it to be work. I don't want it to be so routine that you're bored with it. We used to jump rope a lot and double Dutch and went to a disco to have fun and enjoy ourselves. We didn't go to the disco because somebody said, Go dance for 30 minutes.

When was this? When did you go to a disco?

When I was younger. I want us to get back to doing things because they're fun.

Maybe we need to dance more as a nation.

Yes, I love to dance, and whenever I'm at events and places with music, I will dance. That exercise is medicine. It's better than most pills.

INTERVIEW HAS BEEN CONDENSED AND EDITED.

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