Before I assumed my position as U.S. Surgeon General, I stopped by the hospital where I had worked since my residency training to say goodbye to my colleagues. I wanted to thank them, especially the nurses, whose kindness and guidance had helped me on countless occasions. The nurses had one parting request for me. If you can only do one thing as Surgeon General, they said, please do something about the addiction crisis in America.

I have not forgotten their words. As I have traveled across our extraordinary nation, meeting people struggling with substance use disorders and their families, I have come to appreciate even more deeply something I recognized through my own experience in patient care: that substance use disorders represent one of the most pressing public health crises of our time.

Whether it is the rapid rise of prescription opioid addiction or the longstanding challenge of alcohol dependence, substance misuse and substance use disorders can—and do—prevent people from living healthy and productive lives. And, just as importantly, they have profound effects on families, friends, and entire communities.

I recognize there is no single solution. We need more policies and programs that increase access to proven treatment modalities. We need to invest more in expanding the scientific evidence base for prevention, treatment, and recovery. We also need a cultural shift in how we think about addiction. For far too long, too many in our country have viewed addiction as a moral failing. This unfortunate stigma has created an added burden of shame that has made people with substance use disorders less likely to come forward and seek help. It has also made it more challenging to marshal the necessary investments in prevention and treatment. We must help everyone see that addiction is not a character flaw—it is a chronic illness that we must approach with the same skill and compassion with which we approach heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.

I am proud to release *The Surgeon General’s Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health*. As the first ever Surgeon General’s Report on this important topic, this *Report* aims to shift the way our society thinks about substance misuse and substance use disorders while defining actions we can take to prevent and treat these conditions.

Over the past few decades, we have built a robust evidence base on this subject. We now know that there is a neurobiological basis for substance use disorders with potential for both recovery and recurrence. We have evidence-based interventions that prevent harmful substance use and related problems, particularly when started early. We also have proven interventions for treating substance use disorders, often involving a combination of medication, counseling, and social support. Additionally, we have
learned that recovery has many pathways that should be tailored to fit the unique cultural values and psychological and behavioral health needs of each individual.

As Surgeon General, I care deeply about the health and well-being of all who are affected by substance misuse and substance use disorders. This Report offers a way forward through a public health approach that is firmly grounded in the best available science. Recognizing that we all have a role to play, the Report contains suggested actions that are intended for parents, families, educators, health care professionals, public policy makers, researchers, and all community members.

Above all, we can never forget that the faces of substance use disorders are real people. They are a beloved family member, a friend, a colleague, and ourselves. Despite the significant work that remains ahead of us, there are reasons to be hopeful. I find hope in the people I have met in recovery all across America who are now helping others with substance use disorders find their way. I draw strength from the communities I have visited that are coming together to work on prevention initiatives and to connect more people to treatment. And I am inspired by the countless family members who have lost loved ones to addiction and who have transformed their pain into a passion for helping others. These individuals and communities are rays of hope. It is now our collective duty to bring such light to all corners of our country.

How we respond to this crisis is a moral test for America. Are we a nation willing to take on an epidemic that is causing great human suffering and economic loss? Are we able to live up to that most fundamental obligation we have as human beings: to care for one another?

Fifty years ago, the landmark Surgeon General’s report on the dangers of smoking began a half century of work to end the tobacco epidemic and saved millions of lives. With The Surgeon General’s Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health, I am issuing a new call to action to end the public health crisis of addiction. Please join me in taking the actions outlined in this Report and in helping ensure that all Americans can lead healthy and fulfilling lives.

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