

Using Controversy to Promote Condoms

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THE PRECEDING PAPERS have shown that there is an inadequate level of use of condoms in the United States and that lethal levels of ignorance about condoms exist among at-risk groups. The worldwide picture is even grimmer. According to demographic and health surveys sponsored by the U.S. Agency for International Development, less than 1% of couples in Ghana, Zaire, Kenya, Malawi, or Zimbabwe currently use condoms, even though the level of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) reaches up to 19% of pregnant women in limited areas of some of these countries. We need to remind ourselves that we are at the *beginning* of a worldwide epidemic of AIDS. A preventive vaccine is not in sight, and a cure is biologically implausible.

An increasing number of couples are going to choose sexual abstinence or monogamy with an uninfected partner, and those who work in public health should support and applaud individuals and groups who attempt to accelerate this trend. But others will continue to take risks and to them we can only offer condoms and/or spermicides.

New problems come upon us rapidly, but human societies change

only slowly. And no part of our world is more conservative than that to do with sex. There are probably some deep-seated biological reasons why this is the case: We wear clothes both because they are more flexible and convenient than fur and because we are the only animal that persistently covers up its genitals. We are also the only animal that copulates at times of least bodily activity and in privacy away from the rest of the herd. Finally, we are out of line with other primates in the fact that the female is both selective in relation to mating but receptive to intercourse throughout the menstrual cycle and during pregnancy and lactation. Not surprisingly, these biological characteristics have been turned into some unusual social traits, including a fear of change. Controversy is built into anything to do with contraception in general and condom promotion in particular. Those who work in public health and are interested in family planning and in deterring the spread of sexually transmitted diseases have to decide whether such controversy is to be allowed to drive condoms underground, or is to be forged into a weapon of promotion.

Just as we cover up our genitals, so a significant number of human beings tend to deny new trends in sexual behavior. For example, in February 1987, Her Majesty's prison service in the United Kingdom refused to distribute condoms in an effort to restrain the spread of HIV,

because "homosexuality is against the rules."

The story of condom promotion is that it is often acceptable to a broad range of people in the community but is perceived as threatening by a small section of the social elites that dominate politics, the Church, and even the practice of medicine. In the early 1970s, for example, the Population Services International developed a social marketing program for condoms in rural Kenya. The program proved acceptable and cost-effective, but it aroused concern among a small section of the political and family planning leadership in Nairobi. Perhaps, in a novel program, mistakes were made, but it is poignant to remind ourselves that had that program continued it could have ended up contributing greatly to the control of the current tragic level of HIV infection in that country today.

By contrast, the leadership that one individual in Thailand has been able to show in promoting condoms may well pay off in relation to the AIDS epidemic. Mechai Veravaydia realized in the mid-1970s that the condom was not only an effective method of contraception but an ideal symbol of family planning. He never left his office without a bag of condoms. Initially, politicians, physicians, and even his own family were embarrassed by his persistent promotion, joking, and gimmicks such as inflating condoms in public places. But over the years the

attitude of the nation has been altered, so that literally everyone — from prostitutes to the Prime Minister — is familiar with the condom as an effective method of family planning, and more recently as a practical deterrent against sexually transmitted diseases.

In the mid-1970s, a social marketing program on condoms was launched in the Philippines. It attracted the usual attention of editorial writers and newspaper cartoonists, as well as protests from conservative minorities. Instead of turning this protest into free publicity, the organizers of the program discontinued their efforts. As a consequence, the family planning program suffered and, once again, that nation's ability to deal with the AIDS epidemic has been seriously weakened.

One of the oldest and most successful condom promotion programs by a group other than the condom manufacturers has been the work of the RFSU (State Foundation for Sexual Education) in Sweden. Under the leadership of Lennart Ajax, and with ingenious inputs from professional advertising agencies, a whole package of advertisement, point-of-purchase sales material, and appropriate brands of condoms was created. During a decade when sexually transmitted diseases were on the rise in Europe and North America, gonorrhea rates in Sweden fell. As with other successful programs, it required courage and persistence, and even the family planning group to which RFSU is attached sometimes had

their reservations about the marketing and promotion of condoms.

The issue that faces us in relation to AIDS is an accelerated version of the problem that has dogged those attempting to deal with the problem of rapid population growth — too little action too late. In the case of population growth, vigorous action has only been initiated one or two generations *after* it was both necessary and achievable to offer family planning choices; in the case of AIDS, necessary action delayed for a year or two, or possibly only months, will prove just as costly.

The key to success is not to be afraid of controversy but rather to turn controversy to your advantage. For example, the 1954 Television Act of Great Britain, which set up commercial television, legislated that anything could be advertised on commercial television except for "contraceptives, matrimonial agencies, fortune tellers, and undertakers." In the 1970s the London Rubber Company sponsored a Formula One racing car and painted the brand name of the contraceptive *Durex* across the front of the car. As it sped around the race tracks the television cameras had to pan off it, otherwise they would have broken the law. This silliness attracted a lot of media attention and became so famous that the LRI (London Rubber Industries) was able to rent billboards with a picture of an automobile and the simple message "THE SMALL FAMILY CAR." Today we may face a situation where, if condoms cannot be advertised, undertakers will have to be.

Although the law in Great Britain and precedent in the United States have kept contraceptive advertisements off television, they have led to extraordinary coverage on talk shows and in the news media. Indeed, an intelligent manufacturer might go on promoting their product free of charge *ad infinitum*, merely by producing commercials that they know the networks would turn down and that consequently will get on the nightly news as a result of the controversy they create!

AIDS does two things, in addition to killing people. It makes our private sexual lives public, and it makes women *and* men risk their lives for sex. The victims of the disease have often been articulate, visible individuals, and they have been predominantly men. It is to be hoped that these two factors will turn the tragic threat of AIDS into a realistic, achievable set of preventive measures, including the rational and informed choices of sexual abstinence or monogamy with an uninfected partner in some situations and precaution with condoms in other situations.

We must end where we began, with the simple fact that a cure of AIDS is unlikely to be found, and a vaccine may take years to develop. So every case of HIV transmission that can be prevented today will also prevent two, four, eight, 16 or more cases down the road: Abstinence and condoms are all that stand between us and the death of millions.