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A Historical Perspective On Condoms

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The Ancients

Evidence for condom use by the ancients is sparse and ambiguous. The ancient Egyptians used penis protectors of various sorts, probably not for contraception, but for prophylaxis against tropical diseases.

Writings from the classical civilizations are notably deficient in descriptions of effective contraceptive methods. Antoninus Liberalis, in his *Metamorphoses*, recounts the legend of Minos and Pasiphae. Prokris, daughter of Erechtheus, abandoned her husband, Cephalus, and took refuge with King Minos of Crete. Minos had a most unusual sexually transmissible condition — his semen contained serpents and scorpions. So it is understandable that the poor king's marriage to Pasiphae, the daughter of the Sun, remained childless at this time.

Prokris had a brainstorm by which she could help out her

protector Minos. She slipped the bladder of a goat into the vagina of a woman. Into this bladder Minos cast off his serpent-bearing semen. Then he went to find Pasiphae and cohabited with her.

Clearly, disease prophylaxis was paramount in this early user's mind. Using this novel technique, Pasiphae had eight children. Some classicists believe that this rather nasty legend exhibits misclassification in that it was actually Minos and not his female partner who wore the goat bladder sheath. At any rate, this is the only reference to a male barrier device in either the ancient Greek or Roman sources.¹

Origins

Norman Himes, the respected historian of contraception, believed that the most plausible theory of the origin of the condom is that a medieval slaughter-house worker conceived the notion that an animal membrane stretched over the penis would protect against disease. The first indisputable published reference to a sheath derives from the Italian anatomist Fallopio in 1564. This was a linen sheath moistened with lotion for use against venereal disease.¹ Thirty-three years later, Hercule Saxonia described a similar fabric device soaked in an inorganic salt solution and dried.² In 1671, Mme. Sevigne wrote her daughter, the Countess of Grignan, that the

sheath is "armor against love, gossamer against infection."²

Until this time, the word condom had not yet been coined; we may never know its origin. An apocryphal story has it that the word condom derives from Dr. Condom, a court physician to King Charles II, who reigned from 1660 to 1685. The king became alarmed at his wealth of illegitimate children and the good doctor helped him prevent further errors, for which the relieved king knighted this planned parenthood pioneer.¹ We know that the term first appeared in print in a 1717 English work on syphilis as "condum."¹ It may have derived from the Latin word *condus* (a receptacle). Alternatively, the word may be the product of a medieval Latin scholar who jokingly coined it after the Persian *kendu* or *kondu*, an animal skin used to store grain. One researcher claimed that the word derives from a French village in the Department of Gers. Whatever the true etymologic and geographic origins of the condom, the French colloquially refer to it as "la capote anglaise" (the English cape), while the English counter with their term, "the French letter."²

Europe

In the eighteenth century the contraceptive benefits of the condom began to be appreciated, and the devices were frequently employed by prostitutes. De Sade mentioned

condoms in his writings, and Casanova used them regularly. He once stole a nun's supply of condoms, but relented and returned to her "that which is so precious to a nun who wishes to make sacrifices to love."¹ Casanova was very aware of the varying levels of condom quality and would test them before use by inflating them. Boswell wrote how in May 1763 he "picked up a strong young jolly damsel, led her to Westminster Bridge and there, in armour complete, did I enjoy her upon this noble edifice."²

By this time, condoms were openly sold in London, Paris, Berlin, and St. Petersburg. The brisk London trade in condoms in the eighteenth century was led by a Mrs. Perkins and a Mrs. Philips, who shipped in quantity to France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and elsewhere. One advertisement read:

To guard yourself from shame or fear,
Votaries to Venus hasten here,
None in my ware e'er found a flaw,
Self-preservation's nature's law.²

Of course, not everyone approved of the use of condoms. The reproving tone of Johannes Astruc, a physician of King Louis XV, rings loud and clear:

I hear from the lowest debauchees, who chase without restraint after the love of prostitutes, that there are recently employed in England skins made from soft and seamless hides in the shape of a sheath, and called condoms in English, with which those about to have intercourse wrap their penis as in a coat of mail in order to render themselves safe in the dangers of an ever doubtful battle. They claim,

I suppose, that thus mailed and with spears sheathed in this way, they can undergo with impunity the chances of promiscuous intercourse. But they are greatly mistaken.¹

Perhaps more modern information would have persuaded Dr. Astruc.

Earlier condoms were made from the ceca of sheep or other mammals, an expensive process that put these devices out of the reach of poorer people. The vulcanization of rubber by Goodyear in 1843-44 set the stage for revolutionary advances in the manufacture of condoms, although there is no evidence that rubber ones were produced until the 1870s. Condoms were by then considerably cheaper than in the days of natural products, and their use was mentioned prominently in late-nineteenth century treatises.¹

Twentieth Century

During World War I, sexually transmitted disease (STD) prevention in the American military centered on moral exhortation, menacing posters, and vice squad sweeps through the red-light districts that sprang up around army bases. Late in the war, the American Expeditionary Forces began distributing prophylactic packets (pro-kits). These kits did not contain condoms, but rather relied on calomel ointment, carbolic acid, and camphor. Thus chemical prophylaxis joined moral and educational prophylaxis; the main barrier to infection was self-control. Condom use was viewed as a threat to American family integrity and moral fiber.³ Later, as the conspiracy of silence about venereal diseases was partially lifted in the anti-syphilis campaign of the 1930s, syphilophobia was promoted while the preventability of the disease was never mentioned. Brandt points out

that by as late as 1940, "ASHA (American Social Hygiene Association, now called American Social Health Association) had still failed to promote, or indeed, even mention, the use of condoms in their educational literature."³

On the manufacturing side, the development of liquid-latex condoms lowered costs even more, and in the 1930s over 300 million were sold annually in the U.S.¹ Somebody out there was using them. Finally, in World War II, the U.S. Army awoke to the reality of its soldiers' sexuality. An educational campaign promoted condoms, and as many as 50 million of the devices were sold or freely distributed by the army each month during the war.³ Even then, social engineers criticized what they considered to be the condoning of promiscuity; the conflict between people concerned with disease and others concerned with sexual morals was very much in evidence. Referring to those interested in the control of sexuality, one author wrote ironically of "the spiritual value of syphilis."³ This notion of disease as purifying punishment is hardly dead in our age.

The actual production of condoms worldwide is unknown, but manufacturing capacity is about 5 billion devices, enough to supply each of the world's 40 million users with more than 100 per year.⁴ Among married women of reproductive age, the prevalence of condom use is as high as 50% in Japan and 15-30% in Scandinavia (13% in the developed world overall); in Asia and Latin America the prevalence is about 3-5%; and in Africa less than 1% of such women use condoms.⁴ Most condom-manufacturing and condom-importing countries have national standards for quality control; sizes and widths vary slightly from nation to nation. The devices are produced in many

styles: dry or lubricated, plain or reservoir end, straight or shaped, smooth or textured, and colored or natural.

Irrespective of such details, condom fabrication is a relatively efficient and straightforward process. Just imagine the complexity of condom manufacture if the human penis were corkscrew-shaped like the pig penis!

References

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