

TEENS, SEX AND AIDS: TIME TO FACE UP TO TODAY'S REALITIES

With teen HIV on the rise, is the abstinence-based approach relevant?

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AMID the heady flush of first love, or lust, can two hot-blooded teenagers abstain from sex when even grown-ups yield to temptation?

More importantly, are we willing to live with the risk of giving them the benefit of the doubt when their lives and future could be at stake?

Risk, in this case, is spelt HIV. Just look at the statistics.

According to the Ministry of Health (MOH), human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infections have been on the rise annually, registering a record high of 422 diagnosed last year. Those in their 20s and 30s make up the biggest proportion of total patient load.

Does that mean they contracted the virus only in their 20s? Do we know when they started having sex?

According to the Durex Global Sex Survey Report, the mean age at which Singaporeans lose their virginity is 18.4 years old. How many teens under 18 are having sex if the average yardstick is 18.4 years?

Well, teens have been registering sin-

gle digits in annual HIV statistics. It may not look significant, but each year, the numbers creep up quietly. This is in tandem with the rising trend of sexually-transmitted infections among teens – which has also been steadily increasing in recent years.

It was revealed last week that there were nine teenagers diagnosed with HIV last year, all of whom were between 17 and 19 when detected. This is up from one to four cases each year between 2003 and 2006.

With a higher rate of premarital sex, presumably with multiple partners for some, comes a higher risk of sexual infections.

Despite this, the Ministry of Health is not rolling out its full-fledged HIV prevention programmes for teens.

In Parliament recently, Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan explained the sensitivity in broadcasting the ABC (Abstinence, Be faithful and Condom-use) message nationwide: "Many parents will be upset with such a campaign and we will be accused of promoting promiscuity."

"So, the general broadcast has a small 'c'. On the other hand, the ABC campaign targeted at high-risk groups will have an enlarged 'C' as the main theme."

While this is similar to the argument put forward in the Section 377A debate – let us not upset the majority of the population who



newscomment
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are conservative, or rather, heterosexual – it does not hold water when the majority of Singaporean parents could possibly be affected.

Whether they like it or not, there is likely a 50 per cent chance their children are having sex even before they turn 18.

That the importance of condom usage is overshadowed by the message of abstinence

is disturbing in the light of the recent HIV statistics.

Mr Khaw said that those in "high-risk" groups would be given a stronger message to use condoms. The recurring question is, who are in "high-risk" groups, particularly if we are talking about teenagers who are exploring their sexuality?

To wait until a youth presents a sexually-transmitted infection before counselling on safer sex kicks in is to hide behind a veil of ignorance.

Promoting abstinence and faithfulness is effective in keeping HIV under control, but more focus is needed on efforts to educate sexually-active teens about sexuality and condom use, said volunteer group Action for Aids. How will the authorities get a chance to help teens when premarital sex is emphasised as a moral wrong?

And do the sexuality and parenting programmes we have equip parents adequately to talk to their children about condom use?

Singapore's rapid development in the last 40 years has fast-tracked a generation that may hold different values from those of their parents. Whether one agrees with what teenagers do in their bedrooms is not the issue – and should not detract from the issue, which is: There is a need to implement an effective solution that will not stigmatise. It starts with acknowledging today's realities.

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3rd Cervical Cancer Awareness Month 2008

PREVENTION IS EASY

Cervical cancer, the 6th most common cancer among women in Singapore, is a cancer that can be easily detected early through regular Pap Smear. Vaccination is a new tool to prevent it too. It is a cancer that is highly preventable and early detection saves women and saves womb. We invite you to join Singapore Cancer Society in our effort to reduce the mortality rate of cervical cancer.

We mark May 2008 as the 3rd Cervical Cancer Awareness Month. In this month, we are organizing many activities such as public forum and free Pap Smear. Come along and encourage your family and friends to join us. Prevention is easy. Please take action today!

*FREE Pap smear

Complimentary Pap Smear screening for all Singaporean and PR women, aged 25-69, will be offered from 1st May to 31st May 2008 at participating General Practitioners' Clinic island-wide. Call us at 6421 5804/6221 9578 or email: education@singaporecancersociety.org.sg or visit our website at www.singaporecancersociety.org.sg to find out more about the participating clinics.

*NOTE: GP consultation fees apply

FREE Mandarin Forum

Date : 10 May 2008 (Saturday)
Venue : Bishan Community Club
Address : 51 Bishan St 13 S(579799) (MRT: Bishan)
Time : 2.00 pm - 3.30 pm (Registration start at 1.00 pm)

FREE Malay Cervical Talk

Date : 11 May 2008 (Sunday)
Venue : Al-Muttaqin Mosque
Address : 5140 Ang Mo Kio Central Ave 6 S (569844) (MRT: Ang Mo Kio)
Talk Time : 10.00 am - 11.30 am
No registration required. Seats limited.

English & Malay Forum

Date : 17 May 2008 (Saturday)
Venue : Ballroom Level 2 Conrad Centennial Singapore Hotel
Address : Two Temasek Boulevard S (038982) (MRT: City Hall)
Time : 12.30 pm - 2.30 pm (English)
3.00 pm - 5.00 pm (Malay)

*Registration Fee: \$20 per person complimentary Hi Tea (*Payment received will be donated to SCS Welfare Fund). Make your booking now (Cash / Cheques) at Singapore Cancer Society by 13 May 2008.

Call us at 6421 5804/6221 9578 for enquiry from Monday to Friday, 10am-5pm. Register early to avoid disappointment. No walk in are allowed. Limited seats and goodie bags.

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