PS for 1/24/91

Condom Fraud in New York City

The New York City Board of Education is now considering the ground-breaking proposal of Chancellor Joseph A. Fernandez to hand out condoms to public school students. He calls it “The Expanded HIV/AIDS Education Program Including Condom Availability.”

His proposal is a fraud. There is absolutely no evidence that the plan is likely to achieve its announced objectives. In fact, several studies indicate that the plan could well increase the number of teenagers with AIDS.

The chancellor overlooks the fact that close to 90 percent of AIDS cases are still found in just three specific risk groups: male homosexuals, male and female IV drug users, and female sex partners of male IV drug users. Condoms are not likely to prevent AIDs within those risk groups, but they may actually increase AIDS among teenagers outside these risk groups.

Giving condoms to teenagers who use IV drugs or even to their partners is unrealistic. Are we really supposed to believe that a teenager hyped up on drugs and sexually excited is going to stop and use a condom -- and use it properly?

Giving condoms to teenage homosexuals won’t help, either, because it creates the false impression that using a condom makes anal intercourse safe. Even former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, a proponent of condoms for heterosexual adults, states unequivocally: “Anal intercourse, with or without a condom, is risky.”

It’s not as though we don’t know what happens when high schools give condoms to teenagers. We do. For the last several years, at least 138 school-based contraception clinics have been operating in various locations all over the United States, and about one-fourth of them dispense condoms. They were introduced into the public schools for the express purpose of reducing teenage pregnancies.

Take the words of a researcher for the Center for Population options, a leading advocate of school-based sex clinics and birth control. Dr. Douglas Kirby reported to a professional conference in 1988: “we have been engaging in a research project for several years on the impact of school-based clinics. . . We find basically that. . . there is no measurable impact upon… pregnancy rates.”

Pediatrics Magazine in 1989 reported on a study by Drs. J. W. Stout and F. P. Rivara. They concluded: “sex education programs in junior and senior high schools have little or no effect. . . on preventing unplanned teenage pregnancy.”

The reason for this is that condom distribution programs produce an increase in teenage sexual activity, and. that completely offsets the effect of any increase in teenage condom use. As a result, the programs don’t bring about any net, reduction in teenage pregnancies, and they likewise won’t bring about any reduction in teenage AIDS infection.

Two studies published in **Family Planning Perspectives**, one by Deborah Anne Dawson and the other by William Marsiglio and Frank L. Mott, covered thousands of teenagers who were exposed to programs which either provided them with condoms or told them how and where to get them.

Dawson concluded that this kind of program “increases the odds of starting intercourse at 14 by a factor of 1.5.” Marsiglio and Mott concluded that such programs are “positively and significantly associated with the initiation of sexual activity at ages 15 and 16,” increasing the odds by a factor of at least 1.2.

Other studies corroborate the conclusion that giving contraceptives to teenagers not only encourages them to initiate sexual activity but, increases their activity once they have begun. It is reasonable to expect that distributing condoms in New York City’s public high schools will follow the same pattern.

If not condoms, then what? We need a two-part program.

First, we should adopt a program to tell teenagers that using illicit drugs is wrong. Dr. Rand Stoneburner of the New York City Department of Health stated that condom programs “simply are not going to succeed. What will succeed are drug treatment programs and efforts to stem the cause of addiction in poor communities.”

Second, we should adopt a serious sexual abstinence program, and fortunately several such programs have had successful results. For example, in the Henry Grady program in Atlanta among minority youth (much like those at risk in New York City), sexual activity decreased by 80 percent among 9th graders and 38 percent among l0th graders.

Try it, New York City. You might like it. In any event, don’t lie to children by telling them that the public schools will save them from AIDS by giving them condoms.