



# OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

## Protect our youth... Hand out condoms?

**I**N SINGAPORE, the rates of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as gonorrhoea and syphilis are on the rise. Among those at risk are young people who engage in casual sex. In fact, the rate of increase is especially rapid among the youth and cause for worry.

The most commonly proposed solution is to encourage sexually active youth to practise "safe sex" by using condoms. Safe-sex advocates cite the use of condoms as a means of preventing STI transmission; others say that condoms will not solve the problem.

The real solution lies in inculcating proper values that promote abstinence.

According to Dr Stephen Genuis in an article in the British Medical Journal, promoting mechanical means like condoms as the way to tackle STIs "disregards the complex nature of human sexuality and fails to tackle the underlying social and emotional needs of young people, who are often trapped in high risk sexual behaviour as a consequence of difficult life circumstances. Innumerable adolescents saturated with condom-focused sex education fail to have their fundamental human needs met and end up contracting sexually transmitted infections. For some, risky sex is one component of self-destructive behaviour that includes substance misuse and delinquency."

The great divide between the two sides of the condom debate revolves mainly around two issues: the perception of the human person and the practicality of the approach.

### Different perceptions of the human person

Condom advocates see the human person as a mere biological being who rightfully deserves any help he can receive to avoid biological problems like diseases (STIs, in this case). Therefore, the use of condoms is a means to an end.

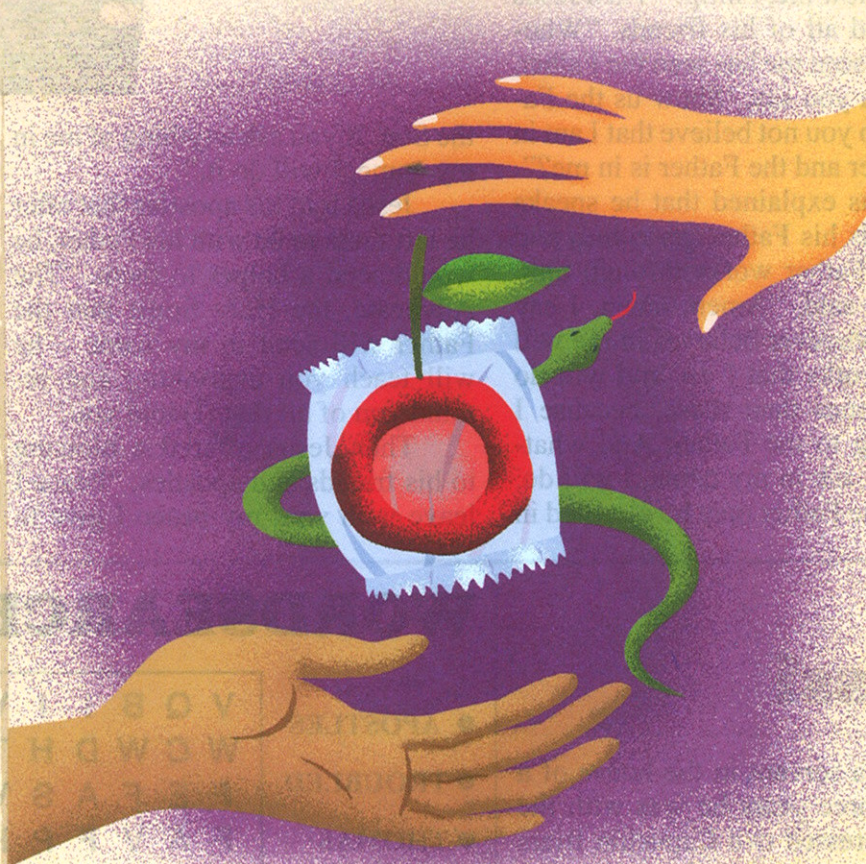
Those who advocate abstinence, however, view the human person as a unity of body and soul, embracing all physical, psychological, emotional and social aspects. Promoting condom use condones casual sex by accepting the individual's choice to engage in risky sexual behaviour.

The advocacy of condoms typifies the utilitarian ethic of deriving maximal pleasure with minimal pain. As a solution, it is incomplete, even detrimental, because it detracts from recognising the person in his entirety. Instead, it limits him to a mere physical being.

Advocates of abstinence propose that it is much more important to help young people develop positive values to make responsible choices for themselves and others. It is better than implying that casual sex is all right as long as a condom makes it "safe sex".

### Is abstinence enough?

Advocates of condom use say that besides teaching abstinence, young people should be given information on



*In this continuing series on Values by Catholic Medical Guild and Caritas Singapore, we look at the issue of promoting the use of condoms among sexually active young people.*

how to use a condom properly – just in case they find themselves having sex. It is unrealistic, they argue, to expect all youth to subscribe to the abstinence message so it is "better to be safe than sorry".

They cite surveys such as the 2006 Health Promotion Board-Ministry of Education survey on sexual attitudes and behaviour of teenagers over 14 years old. It found that about 8 per cent of the teenagers were engaged in sexual activity. Many counsellors suspect that the actual figure is higher today.

So if young people are having sex, it is argued, condoms remain their main hope of reducing the risks of exposure to HIV and STIs, as well as avoiding pregnancy.

### Are condoms a solution?

The opposing argument is that condom usage will not solve the problem of spreading STIs.

Firstly, the condom is far from being 100 per cent effective in preventing HIV and STIs. Its effectiveness – if consistently used – is only 80 per cent for HIV transmission and drops to 62 per cent for gonorrhoea and 26 per cent for chlamydia, the two most common diseases infecting our youth.

Secondly, many people do not use condoms consistently or properly.

Thirdly, studies have shown that promoting condom use tends to encourage riskier sexual behaviour, including having multiple partners.

### Common ground of behavioural change

Perhaps a way forward is to address the common ground shared on both sides of the debate: behavioural change. Be it the change to more consistent condom use, or the change to increase abstinence from casual sex.

In both, the change will have to be rooted in developing self-esteem, an understanding of one's sexuality and one's relationships with others.

For this to happen, parents, educators, mass media, policy makers and society at large must fulfil their social responsibilities in providing more than information. They have to create an environment where youth can feel loved and confident for who they are; and where youth can recognise the unique and beautiful gift of sexuality that each person has. Only then can they make the right decisions for themselves and others when it comes to dealing with their sexuality.

If these issues are addressed adequately and young people are empowered to say "no" to casual sex, there will be no need to promote condom use.

### Condoms in a Nutshell

#### What It Is

■ A condom is a latex sheath put on the male's erect penis to block ejaculated semen from entering the body of a sexual partner. It is commonly used to reduce the probability of pregnancy and the spread of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

#### The Current Landscape

- Safe sex – taking precautions to protect oneself against STIs – came into prominence in the late 1980s as a result of the AIDS epidemic. Condoms are often promoted as the most accessible safe sex aid.
- The World Health Organisation estimates that two-thirds of STIs worldwide occur in teenagers and young adults.
- In Singapore, STI and HIV rates are on the rise, especially among the youth. Between 2002 and 2008, the number of STI cases among youths increased 2.5 times; the number of HIV cases increased nine-fold.
- The Ministry of Education takes the "if you cannot be good, be safe" approach in sex education in Singapore. Its Breaking Down Barriers (BDB) programme teaches the proper use of condom.

#### Arguments For Condom Promotion

- **Reduces risk of HIV and STIs.** Condoms, when used consistently and properly, can reduce the risk of infection of some STIs as well as HIV/AIDS.
- **Prevents unplanned pregnancies.** It is also a contraceptive.
- **Abstinence is unrealistic.** Times have changed, young people are more sexually active, and it is unrealistic to tell young people that they should have sex only after they are married.

#### Arguments Against Condom Promotion

- **Inadequate protection.** When used consistently, condoms will only reduce the risk of HIV transmission by 80 per cent, gonorrhoea by 62 per cent, and chlamydia by 26 per cent. Risk reduction for STIs involving skin to skin contact, such as herpes, syphilis and genital warts, is even less: transmission can occur in areas of the genitals that are not covered by the condom. Only abstinence offers 100 per cent protection.
- **Inconsistent and incorrect usage.** The reasons given by youth for failing to use condoms consistently or correctly include being caught up in the heat of the moment, being unable to say "no", seeking pleasure despite knowing the risks, and peer pressure.
- **Avoiding the root issues.** Research shows that like other high-risk behaviours in young people, risky sexual activity is often an expression of non-sexual need and associated with fundamental problems and difficulties. Youth at risk should receive help that correctly addresses their problems instead of a quick-fix promotion of condom use.

### What the Church Teaches

- **Parents must educate their children on the morality of sex.** "Since parents have conferred life on their children, they have a most solemn obligation to educate their offspring... Their role as educators is so decisive that scarcely anything can compensate for their failure in it... the Church is firmly opposed to an often widespread form of imparting sex information dissociated from moral principles."

(*Familiaris Consortio*, 36 and 37)

- **Condoms not the answer to AIDS.** "To seek a solution to the problem of infection by promoting the use of prophylactics would be to embark on a way not only insufficiently reliable from the technical point of view, but also and above all, unacceptable from the moral aspect. Such a proposal for 'safe' or at least 'safer' sex – as they say – ignores the real cause of the problem, namely, the permissiveness which, in the area of sex as in that related to other abuses, corrodes the moral fibre of the people."

(*Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, The Many Faces of AIDS*, 1988)

- **The answer is the humanisation of sexuality.** "One cannot overcome the problem with the distribution of condoms. On the contrary, they increase the problem. The solution can only be a humanisation of sexuality, that is, a spiritual human renewal that brings with it a new way of behaving with one another... to renew the human being from the inside, to give him spiritual human strength for proper behaviour regarding one's own body and toward the other person."

(*Pope Benedict XVI, Light of the World*, 2010)