

'Multiple Epidemics' of Sexually Transmitted Diseases Devastate Millions

by Stephen Vincent

WASHINGTON – A report on sexually transmitted diseases titled "Tracking the Hidden Epidemics" might sound like the work of a conservative group promoting abstinence through fear. In fact, the report was released in 2000 by the federal government's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and is posted on the agency's Web site. Page after page of staggering studies and statistics about hard-to-spell diseases make for grim reading and raise concern for the future health and fertility of the nation. The report sheds light on facts that are often overlooked in sex-saturated major media. Indeed, most people in the United States remain unaware of the risks and consequences of all but the most prominent STDs, such as HIV/AIDS, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports. This despite the fact that STDs are "extremely widespread, have severe and sometimes deadly consequences and add billions of dollars to the nation's health care costs each year."

The center concludes that there is "not one single STD epidemic but multiple epidemics." And those epidemics are "hidden," the agency says, because many infected persons do not show symptoms such as sores or fevers yet are capable of passing a disease to a sexual partner. As a result, many people do not know the ease with which STDs are transmitted and the devastating problems they can cause, from infertility to fatal cancers. To address the lack of knowledge, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is holding an "STD Prevention Conference: next March in Philadelphia.

Too Late for Some

For many, the focus is years too late. By 2000 65 million individuals in the United States were carrying an incurable sexually transmitted disease, a viral infection that does not respond to antibiotics or other treatment. About 15 million new cases are reported each year, half of them of the incurable kind, and teens account for about one-fourth of all new infections. There are some 45 million new infections each year. The fastest-growing STD, with 5.5 million new cases annually, is the incurable human papilloma virus, which comes in 30 to 60 strains, some of which are linked to cervical cancer. The Alan Guttmacher Institute, the research arm of Planned Parenthood, reports that by age 24 at least 1 in 3 sexually active persons has contracted a sexually transmitted disease.

The lack of comprehensive campaign against STDs amounts to a "conspiracy" of silence, says Dr. Lester Rupperberger, a gynecologist from Langhorne, Pa. A member of the Catholic Medical Association, Rupperberger has lectured widely on STDs. "It's plain from the studies and the literature that there is a rapidly spreading epidemic of STDs," he said. "All doctors know this – they all learn about these diseases in medical school – yet information about the epidemic is not getting into the general media; it's not trickling down to the general public." News of STDs cuts against the "safer sex" message favored by so many in the media, he said. The facts also indicate abstinence or monogamy as the only reliable ways to prevent sexually transmitted diseases, and "telling that to patients in this culture sounds too much like moralizing. But in this case it's simply good medical advice," Rupperberger said.

Mary Beth Bonacci, who travels the country speaking to young people about the Catholic view of sexuality and chastity, told the Register that most teens and young adults know about STDs in general but have little understanding of the serious consequences of infection. "They think, 'Not me, not my boyfriend or girlfriend,' or that condoms will protect me," Bonacci said. "I find that young people do not respond much to fear tactics about STDs. What has a real effect on them is stressing the nature of authentic and lasting love."

Studies have shown condoms unreliable in preventing the spread of STDs, yet some organizations still push them with a blind faith. In a Web site section on sexually transmitted infections, Planned Parenthood Federation of America warns that moral issues should not be raised in relation to sex. The "stigma and shame that result may lead people to neglect taking good care of their sexual health," Planned Parenthood states. The implication is that moral censure and not illicit "sex play" (a term used throughout the Web site) is the real danger. The Web site then goes on to talk about "safer sex." For most of the STDs listed, condoms are said to offer "very good" or "some" protection. Abstinence is not given as an option. Yet another study released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2000 reports on the imperfect protections provided by latex condoms. The center states that the

"surest way to avoid transmission of [STDs] is to abstain from sexual intercourse or to be in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and you know is uninfected."

Moral Aspects

Contrary to the Planned Parenthood message, sexual conduct necessarily carries a moral dimension because it involves relations between two persons and has consequences for society. The Catechism of the Catholic Church presents chastity inside and outside marriage as the only responsible behavior. "Chastity means the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being," the Catechism states. "The alternative is clear: Either man governs his passions and finds peace, or he lets himself be dominated by them and becomes unhappy" (nos. 2337, 2338). Such traditional moral views are getting a wider hearing in government circles under the Bush administration. The federal government has committed about \$100 million annually to promoting abstinence, still far below the estimated \$400 million that goes to agencies that push condoms.

In July the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced 28 new grants totaling more than \$15 million to help communities develop and implement abstinence-education programs for teens. This brought to 73 the number of community and faith-based agencies that have received money in the past two years in programs run by the Health Resources and Services Administration, which also oversees block grants to states for abstinence education. Among the recent recipients are Catholic Charities of Honolulu (\$735,000), Catholic Social Services of Fall river, Mass., (\$125,000) and a half-dozen pregnancy centers. Another round of grants is scheduled for the fall.

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