

Solutions to STD epidemic are more complex than condom use

BY BARB MALEK

The writer, of Omaha, has worked for 23 years with young women facing unintended pregnancies and STDs.

As the administrator for a pregnancy resource center, I face many young women who are struggling not only with an unexpected pregnancy but also with our local epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases. Chlamydia and gonorrhea are rampant.

However, I don't believe that the answer is as simplistic as making young people more aware of condom use, as Austin Person suggested in his April 20 Midlands Voices essay.

A convincing, statistical argument can be made that increased condom use is not the answer to our STD onslaught. Condoms

may help in some cases—but are ineffective in dealing with the spread of disease from anal or oral sex. Some diseases are even spread by skin-to-skin contact outside of the vaginal area. Plus, statistics show that condom use has increased right along with the steady increase of STDs.

If we truly want to see Douglas County's disease rate decrease, we must examine the true causes and put aside personal prejudices and politics in order to address real solutions.

Looking past the rhetoric, it is clear that the rates of STDs have increased along with the rates of sexual activity, especially with

the increase in the number of sexual partners. A sexual exposure chart shows that even if a young man or woman has had only one partner, he or she also will be at risk from each of the individuals his or her partner has had sex with.

Former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop has said, "When you have sex with someone, you are having sex with everyone they have had sex with for the last 10 years, and everyone they and their partners have had sex with for the last 10 years." It's not an overstatement to say that it is a sexual cesspool out there.

Do condoms reduce the risk of infection? In one way, it must be argued that they do cut down on some exposure. However, it also can be argued that they provide a

dangerous placebo that convinces young people that they will be safe from disease and therefore free to be as sexually active as they wish. In actuality, their risk is greatly increased.

Is the answer increased education in the schools? Is that really where young people are getting most of their influence about sexual activity? Recent studies have shown that teens are more impacted in their sexual choices by television, movies and music than they are in school.

In a study done by the University of California-Santa Barbara, it was pointed out that 66 percent of all prime-time shows contained sexual content. Yet, STDs were mentioned only once every 10 hours of viewing. The bulk of the sexual action occurs between

unmarried characters, and yet the consequences of pregnancy and disease rarely are shown.

Another study, by the American Journal of Pediatrics, gave alarming statistics connecting the time spent listening to songs with strong sexual content to an increase in risky sexual behavior. Then there is the growing problem of easily accessible Internet pornography. The bottom line is that media often present a picture of sexual activity as beautiful and liberating—without also showing the ugly consequences of disease.

There are no simplistic answers to this problem. Most young women I speak with know about the dangers of sexual activity. They also know about condoms. However, many are fa-

therless and seeking love wherever they can find it, regardless of the consequences. And some just never thought anything bad could happen to them.

Regardless of personal feelings on the realities or practicality of teaching abstinence, the bottom line is that the rates of STDs and sex outside of marriage are clearly linked.

We all need to ask what we are willing to do to bring this epidemic to an end, even if the answer is not the politically correct one to choose. It will require courage to face the truth, however difficult it might be, and spare the lives and futures of a generation of young people.

Opinion essays reflect the writer's views and not necessarily the editorial position of The World-Herald.