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### **Abstinence is best way of preventing young people being “engulfed” by sexually transmitted infection**

**Editorial: Abstinence under fire 2003; 79: 365-6**

Contrary to the statements issued by the UK government, abstinence from sex is the best way of preventing young people from being “engulfed” by the tide of sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies. Advice to use condoms is simply not enough.

This is the view of Dr Trevor Stammers, general practitioner and senior tutor at St George's Hospital London, writing in the latest issue of Postgraduate Medical Journal.

Dr Stammers expresses his surprise that the Chief Medical Officer and the UK's Health Protection Agency should be so dismissive of abstinence approaches on the grounds of lack of evidence for their effectiveness. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that such an approach “can be very effective at delaying the age of first intercourse,” he writes.

In support of his statement, he cites the abstinence only (discouragement from having sex) and abstinence plus (discouragement from having sex, but also providing contraceptive advice) programmes in the USA.

A review of six abstinence only programmes showed attitudinal changes in four of them and delays in embarking on first sex in another, writes Dr Stammers. A review of two abstinence plus programmes indicated that the approach had delayed first sex by up to 18 months in those who had been virgins at the outset and resulted in less likelihood of unprotected sex among those who were not.

The author also points to US community based programmes in South Carolina, New York, and Seattle, all of which advocate delaying the age of first sex among teens, using slogans, such as “Not Me, Not Now,” and extensive media advertising. The evidence from all of them shows a fall in teen pregnancy rates and/or a drop in the number of young people reporting first sexual intercourse by the age of 15, he says.

The Seattle programme also showed that children involved in the project up to the age of 12 were less likely to have started having sex by the age of 21 and had fewer sexual partners than those not involved in the project.

Dr Stammers also cites the steep fall in rates of HIV infection in Uganda since 1992, where condom use is one of the lowest in Africa. These figures, he says, have coincided with “dramatic changes in sexual behaviour.” The percentage of 13 to 16 year old boys who said they had had sex fell from over 60% in 1994 to 5% in 2001; for girls, the equivalent figures were 25%, falling to 3%.

“In the UK, sexual activity is one area in which encouraging abstinence in the under 16s is regarded as an unreasonable goal,” he writes. “We expect our children to abstain from stealing, bullying, and a host of other activities, but often imply that it is less important where sexual activity is concerned.”

And he concludes: “It will certainly take more than condoms to reverse the tide of sexually transmitted infections currently engulfing young people in Britain.”