

The scientific evidence against 'condomania'

When forced to confront facts, even the sexperts admit condoms can't stop AIDS

Editor: Media around the world reported last month that the Vatican was questioning its long-standing opposition to the promotion of condom use as a means of preventing the transmission of the AIDS virus. They cited as evidence an article published last spring in the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano. The reports proved false, and a true account of the Catholic Church's unchanged position appeared on The Interim's on-line service, LifeSite News (see the archives for Sept. 19 and 20 at www.lifesite.net). What follows is a reminder that, apart from the moral issues involved, the "safe-sex" strategy is also dubious from a scientific and medical standpoint.

By William Gairdner
The Interim

For years we have been told that condom use is the best way to contain the spread of AIDS. But is that true? It would seem utterly sensible to ask whether or not the latex condom will in fact do what we are told.

We can certainly thank it for a degree of protection against some ordinary sexually transmitted diseases. But the same cannot be said for the HIV, the virus thought to cause AIDS. I was concerned about this some years ago, and in 1995, spoke with the editor of Rubber Chemistry and Technology, Dr. C. Michael Roland of the U.S. Naval Research Laboratory in Washington D.C., about his research on "intrinsic flaws" in latex rubber condoms and surgical gloves (published in *Rubber World*, June, 1993). It is alarming, to say the least, and gives at least a partial answer to *The Globe and Mail's* naive question: "Why, in spite of so much effort, does

AIDS keep spreading?" Roland said that what I am about to relate is "common knowledge among good scientists who have no political agenda."

Electron microscopy reveals the HIV to be about 0.1 microns in size (a micron is a millionth of a metre). It is 60 times smaller than a syphilis bacterium, and 450 times smaller than a single human sperm.

The standard U.S. government leakage test (ASTM) will detect water leakage through holes only as small as 10 to 12 microns (most condoms sold in Canada are made in the U.S., but I'll mention the Canadian test below). Roland says in good tests based on these standards, 33 per cent of all condoms tested allowed HIV-sized particles through, and that "spermicidal agents such as nonoxonol-9 may actually ease the passage."

Roland's paper shows electron microscopy photos of natural latex. You can see the natural holes, or intrinsic flaws. The "inherent defects in natural rubber range between 5 and 70 microns."

And it's not as if governments don't know. A study by Dr. R.F. Carey of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control reports that "leakage of HIV-sized particles through latex condoms was detectable for as many as 29 of 89 condoms tested." These were brand new, pre-approved condoms.

But Roland says a closer reading of Carey's data actually yields a 78 per cent HIV-leakage rate, and concludes: "That the

CDC would promote condoms based on [this] study ... suggests its agenda is concerned with something other than public health and welfare." The federal government's standard tests, he adds, "cannot detect flaws even 70 times larger than the AIDS virus." Such tests are "blind to leakage volumes less than one microliter - yet this quantity of fluid from an AIDS-infected individual has been found to contain as many as 100,000 HIV particles."

Condoms are not the solution to the tragedy of AIDS, he warns. "It is ludicrous to believe they allow one to safely engage in sexual relations with HIV carriers. Their promotion for that purpose is dangerous and irresponsible." As one U.S. surgeon memorably put it, "The HIV virus can go through a condom like a bullet through a tennis net."

It's the same story with latex gloves. Gloves from four different manufacturers revealed "pits as large as 15 microns wide and 30 microns deep." More relevant to HIV transmission, Roland says that "five-micron-wide channels, penetrating the entire thickness, were found in all the gloves." He said the presence of such defects in latex "is well established."

Perhaps that is why a review of major studies shows that while condom use may reduce "rates" of infection, nevertheless the acknowledged HIV infection rate for couples using condoms is very high, ranging from 13 to 27 per cent. Handing a student a condom to protect against AIDS is like giving

him an overcoat to walk across a battlefield. Meanwhile, strict avoidance of sex with infected partners gives a 5,000-fold increase in protection.

For Canada, the story is the same. A standard Health and Welfare Canada test of condoms manufactured between 1987 and 1990, based on stringent tests of pressure, leakage, and volume (as in the U.S., there is no effort to examine micron-level leakage), reported that an astonishing 40 per cent of the condoms tested failed at least one of the tests. Tests in 1991 showed an "improved" 28 per cent rate.

On June 17, 1987, Dr. Maria Crenshaw, past president of the American Association of Sex Educators stood up before 800 sex educators at the World Congress of Sexology, in Heidelberg, and asked a revealing question: "If you had available the partner of your dreams, and knew this person carried the HIV virus, would you rely on a condom for protection?"

Not a single person raised a hand. So she accused them of giving irresponsible advice to the young.

William Gairdner, Ph.D., is the author of a number of bestsellers, including The Trouble With Canada (Stoddart, 1990). The War Against The Family (Stoddart, 1993) and most recently, Canada's Founding Debates (Stoddart, 1999). His next book, The Trouble With Democracy, will appear in January, 2001. He is married and is the father of five children.

RELATED ARTICLE

New study shows condoms useless against deadly human papillomavirus, page 22