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## Christine Oker and Helen Matthews

### A survey of Hertfordshire sex education

Hertfordshire has a 10-year Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (2001-2010), to reduce under 18 teenage conception rates and ensure better outcomes for young people and young parents in the county. The strategy was developed jointly with health and other relevant partners, in line with Government requirements.

In 2006, Hertfordshire Teenage Pregnancy Partnership Board (HTPPB) commissioned SHEU to collect reliable information about young people's lifestyles. A survey was the second element of a local media campaign planned by HTPPB and followed a literature review - 'Sexual health and sexual behaviour in 13 to 15 year olds, with particular reference to Boys and Young Men' by Penny Jolley and David Regis (2006).

The survey was carried out in secondary schools and local teachers were briefed on how to collect the most reliable data. Pupils in Years 9, 10 and 11 completed the questionnaire anonymously. Data were eventually gathered from a sample of 3,218 secondary pupils.

#### Findings

The following extracts concentrate on sex education issues and are taken from a summary report of the findings.

#### Confidants

54% say "There is usually someone I can talk with about most things". This does suggest that there is a substantial body of young people who lack someone in their lives that they can confide in.

#### Sources of support

Two-thirds of the sample live with Mother and Father together. 'Family' feature

strongly as a support for health and many other topics. 'Friends' score well for a number of support issues including, "Thinking you are gay lesbian or bisexual".

However, "Thinking you are gay lesbian or bisexual" was the topic where respondents most commonly give no source of support; this was still true for those young people who were most worried about this issue. 16% of young people say they worry "quite a lot or a lot about being gay, lesbian or bisexual". These young people clearly have special needs which may not be met by health promotion programmes that assume a heterosexual point of view.

#### Information about sex

71% say they know where to go for more information or support. 55% say they think they know pretty much all they need; 42% would like to know more. Young people were asked 'what is their main sources of sex information' and 'what it should be'

	Main source is...	Main source should be...
School	1st	1st
Friends	2nd	3rd
Parents	3rd	2nd

In other SHEU surveys, parents score much better among younger pupils for both questions, typically coming top for each.

#### Contraception

80% or more of Year 11 pupils identify the condom and the Pill as reliable to stop pregnancy (the remaining 20% mostly think them not reliable, rather than being unaware of them). Perceived reliability for other methods is much lower, and figures for younger pupils (especially males) are lower again.

The proportion who think them unreliable are an important group; do they

believe they know a different, reliable method, or will they abstain from intercourse until they are ready for parenthood? In fact, of the Year 11 pupils who do not consider condoms to be reliable contraceptives, 59% think the Pill is reliable.

These questions are not entirely straightforward to design, let alone answer. However, they suggest an element of ignorance or even misunderstanding of key sexual health messages by young people. It might be that these pupils are not picking up sexual health messages because they are not interested in them, and they might not be interested in them because they are not planning to have sex any time soon. This is a reassuring point, but perhaps a misleading one, because not all sexual activity is planned.

### **Sexually transmitted infections**

86% of Year 11 students believe that HIV/AIDS can be treated but not cured; about 70% of Year 11 students think that pubic lice can be treated and cured. There is a marked sex difference among Year 11 students for Chlamydia: 33% of boys think that it can be treated and cured, while 59% of girls so believe. These questions suggest that there is an element of misunderstanding about sexually transmitted infections (an admittedly complex area).

### **Contraceptive methods and infection**

Over 83% of Year 11 pupils identify condoms as a reliable way to prevent infections. However, younger pupils are more likely than older pupils to agree with a number of statements including, "Using condom during sex reduces the chances of pregnancy". This loss of confidence in condoms with age has obvious significance for teenage pregnancy.

### **Attitudes towards the law on sex**

About three quarters of all pupils agree with statements that: "It's illegal for two teenagers under 16 to have sex with each other", "It's illegal for girls (and boys) to have sex under 13", "It's illegal for someone

under 16 to have any sort of sexual activity".

Those who agree are correct, although young people may understand slightly different things by "having sex" and "any sort of sexual activity". There clearly exists for each item about a quarter of respondents who are not sure or who are misinformed about their legal position.

There is a distinct minority (a third at most, often fewer) who agree that, "It's illegal for someone over 16 to have sex with someone under 16", "Two teenagers aged 15 would never be prosecuted for having sex" and "Teenagers under 16 can still get sexual health advice legally".

## **Conclusions**

There is an element of ignorance and/or misunderstanding about sexual health among young people in Hertfordshire, and these misunderstandings extend to the law about sex as it relates to young people. This is significant even for intending abstainers, since not all sexual activity is planned.

There is a significant amount of distrust of condoms as a method of contraception and this sits at odds with the promotion of this method to young people.

The 'releasing' effect of alcohol on behaviour is well-known and is also apparent in these data: for example, over a quarter of Year 11 students agree that "alcohol has affected how far I have gone with a boy/girl". It may be desirable to do more, during health education across the age groups, to emphasise the link between use of alcohol and sexual health risks.

## **The way forward**

As a result of this work, Hertfordshire has excellent data for use by schools, Childrens' Services, the Primary Care Trust as well as other statutory and voluntary agencies that support the health of young people in Hertfordshire.

In addition to the local media campaign planned, the results of this study will inform action plans for joint working between and within organisations involved in improving the health and well-being of pupils in and out of school.