Also, such a division cannot account for the more 43% of schools who feel they address the topic of sex and the law in good detail.

Given that 14% of schools reported not covering the topic at any point in any year, one wonders how exactly young people are expected to make informed choices about their lives with a lack of such basic information.

Age appropriate

Timing is also a crucial element in sex education. If one starts from the premise that sex education should be age-appropriate, thereby giving young people the information they need in order to make informed decisions, it would seem sensible that basic education around puberty be delivered prior to girls experiencing menarche.

It has been widely accepted for some time that the average age of puberty for girls is 12–13, and it is unsurprising to find 84% of schools covering puberty in Year 7.

However, a significant number of schools are revisiting puberty in Year 9, with one school addressing the topic for the first time, two years after the average age of menarche and useless for girls who started puberty aged 8.

Organisations such as AVERT are increasingly becoming aware of such instances, where girls are left open to trauma unaware of why they are bleeding.

Influencing factors

If sex education provision is to improve, then we have to establish what is currently limiting schools from providing an ideal curriculum.

When asked, the schools rated ‘teacher confidence/commitment’ (91%), ‘supplementary resources’ (94%), ‘planning time’ (86%) and ‘INSET’ (63%) and ‘TIMS’ (59%) as being amongst the most influential factors upon sex education.

Yet when asked how satisfied the schools were with these factors in relation to their provision of sex education, a different picture emerged.

Whilst 84% were either satisfied or very satisfied with their resources, 51% of schools reported being unhappy with their TIMS and 45% were unsatisfied with their INSET.

Strangely though, this appears to have had little bearing upon their confidence or commitment, with just 4% unsatisfied with this.

However, in contradiction to the long-held belief that teachers are mostly constrained by time allocation on the timetable, only 13% reported that they were unsatisfied with the time allotted in their school for sex education.

This however is open to interpretation, given the responses to the depth of the sex education currently provided.

Given many schools’ apparent reluctance to broach the more contentious topics in the programme of study with their pupils, one has to ask whether insufficient training combined with time constraints is responsible for some teachers remaining with and revisiting basic topics.

Non-statutory subject

Alternatively it could be argued that teachers are currently maximising their time with young people, ensuring that they have a solid knowledge base.

However, if it becomes essential for teachers to move beyond this base, then time pressures will become more acute and the number of teachers unsatisfied with the time allotted will inevitably rise.

With sex education remaining a non-statutory subject, it seems unlikely that this situation will improve much, when one takes into account mounting pressures on the timetable.

Telephone survey

When asked directly in the telephone survey if they had any additional concerns, the following points were raised.

Nearly half of those interviewed had had difficulty in treating sex in a positive way, for fear they were perceived as encouraging under-age sex.

Other schools reported that they were more concerned about the quality of provision in their former primary schools, than in their own.

Finally, when asked whether sex education could be said to be ‘too little, too late and too historical’ in their schools, the majority (65%) disagreed, saying that whilst it may previously have been true or may apply elsewhere, it was not the case in their school.

Since this research was completed, schools have been given new guidance on sex and relationships education from the DfEE. We welcome the fact that there is guidance and were pleased to be invited to comment on it, but we are afraid that the final document leaves something to be desired.

Despite its length, the document is still not clear enough, and is in some places contradictory. Teachers may still struggle to make and implement clear policy.

While the number of schools involved in this survey only provides us with a snapshot on the current provision of sex education, at the very least this gives us some indication of where the main problem areas may be.

This article, kindly reproduced from ‘YoungMinds Magazine’ shows the results from three research reports which support the view that drug misuse among young people may well have peaked.

Steve Flood

Drug misuse among the young may have peaked

Steve Flood is Editor of YoungMinds Magazine which is published every two months. Subscriptions cost £26 per annum (8 issues). YoungMinds is a unique national charity working to promote the mental health of children and young people.

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L e v e l s of drug misuse among young people may well have peaked, latest Government figures suggest, a finding which Ministers will be keen to interpret as an early sign that Drugs Czar Keith Hellawell’s ten year strategy to reduce drug misuse is on course to succeed.

A national survey of levels of drugs, alcohol and tobacco use amongst more than 6,000 11-15 year olds in England, has found that cigarette smoking fell between 1996 and 1999, use of illegal drugs increased only marginally, and alcohol consumption remained the same.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) survey which was commissioned by the Department of Health, found no increase from the previous year in the numbers of 11-15 year olds who admitted to having used illegal drugs in the month preceding the survey - 1 in 14 young people said they had done so.

There had been a slight increase (from 11 to 12%) of those who said they had used drugs at any time during the previous 12 months, but the increase was not statistically significant. However, ONS says there was a significant rise - from 13 to 15 per cent - of those who had used drugs at some point in their lives.

Among both boys and girls, the survey found marked variation according to age. Only one in a hundred 11 year olds said they had used drugs in the last year, but nearly a third of 15 year olds (31 per cent) had done so. Boys were slightly more likely than girls to have used drugs within the previous 12 months (33%, compared with 23%).

Not surprisingly, cannabis is by far the most popular illegal drug - 11 per cent of pupils said they had used it during the previous year. The next most commonly used substances - glue, gas and poppers - had each been used by only 1 in 50 young people.

However, many more young people said they had been offered drugs than had tried them, with over a third having been offered at least one type of drug. Boys were more likely to have been offered drugs than girls (56% compared to 33%).

While cannabis was the drug which young people said they were most likely to have been offered, 16 per cent said they had been offered stimulants (a group which includes cocaine, crack, ecstasy and amphetamines), and five per cent had been approached with offers of heroin or methadone.

The ONS survey is broadly in line with findings published earlier in the year by the Schools Health Education Unit (SHEU), which produced an annual analysis of young people’s illegal drug use since 1997, based on the Unit’s Teenage Related Behaviour Questionnaire.

According to the SHEU research, the percentage of young people who have tried an illegal drug peaked in 1995-96, and may have even come down since then. The SHEU’s latest survey found that 21 per cent of today’s 16 - 17 year olds said they had tried an illegal drug at some point in their lives.

However, the SHEU study also supports the ONS survey’s finding that many more young people have been offered drugs. It found that nearly 4 out of 10 (41%) 15 year olds (39%) knew where to get hold of illegal drugs, 58 per cent knew a drug user and 44 per cent had been


Copies can be obtained from AVERT, 4 Brighton Road, Horsham, West Sussex RH12 5BA. Tel: 01403 210602, E-mail postmaster@avert.org
offered an illegal substance at least once.

Further support for the view that drug misuse among young people has peaked came at the beginning of June with publication in the British Medical Journal (BMJ) 2000; 320:1536 of the results of a separate study.

Martin Plant and Patrick Miller from the Alcoholic and Health Research Centre in Edinburgh, carried out a survey of 2,900 15-16 year olds attending private and state schools across the UK in 1999. They concluded that most forms of drug use had fallen since 1995.

They also found some marked regional variations, with young people in Northern Ireland reporting greater use of glasses and solvents and young Scots being more likely to have used cannabis and amphetamines.

"Among girls, there had been a fall from 40 to 33 per cent of those who had used illicit drugs. Boys showed a similar decline - 39.5 per cent in 1999, compared to 45 per cent four years earlier".

Plant and Miller described the reductions in drug use since the mid-1990s as "striking", even if they do eventually turn out to have been temporary.

A full report of the CNS study, which the Government plans to repeat every two years to monitor the effectiveness of its policies to reduce drug misuse among the young, will be published in the autumn.

Young People and Illegal Drugs into 2000 costs £9.50 from the SREU, Renalade House, Bonnyburn Road, Edinburgh EH4 3AY (Tel 0131 556 2727).

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The Camden and Islington Healthy School Festival Day was held in order to celebrate the achievements of the 20 schools currently involved.

Andi Stother & Azad Abdul

Festival Day

The Camden and Islington Healthy School Scheme involves Camden Local Education Authority, CEATs and Camden and Islington Health Promotion Service working together to support schools in becoming healthier places to work and learn.

The scheme is funded through a DEE grant and the Camden and Islington Health Action Zone. 29 schools are currently involved in the scheme.

On July 5th 2000, 140 pupils and their teachers (from 11 schools) attended the Camden and Islington Healthy School Scheme Festival Day held at Coram's Fields, London.

"Thank you for the opportunity to participate in so many interesting activities".

The Camden and Islington Healthy School Festival Day was held in order to celebrate the achievements of the pilot schools: welcome new schools to the scheme and give pupils the opportunity to experience a variety of activities.

The day consisted of a variety of health-related activities and was particularly memorable, for many of the pupils, due to the appearance of a celebrity guest.

At lunch-time, we were joined by 'Rhino' from the popular TV programme 'Gladiators'. He spoke for a few minutes about the importance of being healthy, eating a balanced diet and having an active lifestyle, and finished his visit by signing autographs.

The mayors of Camden and Islington opened the festival, which was attended by pupils and teachers from 11 primary, secondary and special schools across the two boroughs.

"My best part of the day was meeting Rhino because he has such big muscles!"

Children and adults took part in a selection of health-related workshops: activities, run by a range of professionals, included Turkish Dance, First Aid, Deaf-Blind Communication and Circus Skills.

"When we were doing the Turkish dance I made me feel all happy and warm!"

"Sign language was my favourite part of the day because it's interesting to learn new things!"

We hope that pupils and teachers went away from the day with a broad definition of what we mean by 'Health' and the idea that 'Health can be fun for everyone'.

"All in all a great day, the students were thrilled to meet Rhino which was an added bonus. Thank You!"