

Government urged to end abstinence-only education

By Cheryl Wetzstein
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Abstinence-only education is a flawed policy that should be abandoned, a trade association for teen health providers says in a paper published this week.

"Although abstinence is often presented as the moral choice for teenagers, the current federal approach to abstinence-only funding raises serious ethical and human rights concerns," the Society for Adolescent Medicine said in its *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

People have a "basic human right" to complete sexual health information, the paper said.

However, it said, abstinence-only programs don't teach teens about contraception and they discriminate against homosexual youth by teaching them that sex should be saved until marriage.

Abstinence-only programs "should be abandoned" and its funding reassigned to programs that offer "comprehensive, medically accurate sexuality education," concluded the paper, which was endorsed by the American Col-

lege Health Association.

Leslee Unruh, president of the National Abstinence Clearinghouse in Sioux Falls, S.D., scoffed at the paper as "the same-old, same-old."

"All the data is there: If you abstain from sex until marriage, you're going to have better outcomes in life" physically, emotionally and financially, Mrs. Unruh said.

What's "ludicrous," she added, is thinking that teenagers can have responsible sex.

Even if they don't get pregnant or get a disease, it's not going to be good for them emotionally or help them achieve better outcomes in life, she said.

President Bush supports abstinence education, and funding for the approach has more than doubled during his administration. Federal funding for abstinence education in fiscal 2006 is expected to increase again, albeit modestly, to \$177 million.

However, the Society for Adolescent Medicine and other health trade groups are dismayed by the federal government's abstinence education ap-

proach, primarily because of its strict eight-point definition.

With abstinence-only education, "the problem is not the 'abstinence', the problem is the 'only,'" said Dr. John Santelli, a health professional at Columbia University and lead author of the paper.

The eight-point definition, created by Congress in the 1996 welfare law, dictates that abstinence education must teach abstinence as the "expected standard" for all school-age children and monogamous marriage as the "expected standard of human sexual activity."

The rules are so strict that federal abstinence grantees cannot teach about "safer sex," even with their own nonfederal funds, Dr. Santelli and his colleagues wrote.

Sexual abstinence is a healthy choice for teens, they wrote, but "few Americans remain abstinent until marriage" and abstinence-only education doesn't offer much to sexually active or homosexual teens. Making abstinence-only messages the sole option for teens is "flawed from scientific and medical ethics viewpoints."