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Researcher: Sex worse for teens than smoking

By Elianna Marziani
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The increasingly casual attitude of teen-agers toward sex is "more dangerous than smoking," according to the Medical Institute of Austin, Texas, which has been studying teen-age sexual activity.

"Teens just do not know how at risk they are for emotional, physical, spiritual and psychological problems," said Dr. Joe McIlhane, president and founder of the institute. "They don't know in their minds any reason to stop or not [engage in sexual behavior]. Nobody's taught them how much they can be hurt by it."

About 50 percent of all current American high school students will lose their virginity, with nearly 900,000 teen-age girls becoming pregnant each year, the institute reports.

The Medical Institute is a non-profit medical organization committed, in its own words, to "presenting only and completely what the data tells us." Among the findings:

- 20 percent of sexually active teens get an infection.
- Approximately two-thirds of those who contract sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are under 25, and 50 percent of all newly reported HIV infections are found in people under 25. HIV and herpes are both incurable lifelong diseases.

In addition to compiling research from outside sources, the Medical Institute has conducted its own interviews with teens and surfed the Internet for teen attitudes toward sex. It found that many teens view sex in general casually, and there is a huge dichotomy between their evaluation of the seriousness and consequences of sexual intercourse and oral sex.

"Oral sex and intercourse are two very different things," said one 16-year-old girl. "With oral sex, you get gratification without any of the consequences of actually having sex."

Another 16-year-old female agreed.

"With oral sex, you don't get the emotional attachment that comes with intercourse," she said. "Oral sex isn't really sex; it's much more casual, and it comes with a lot fewer responsibilities."

The Medical Institute is worried about these attitudes in particular, because several sexually transmitted diseases can be transmitted through oral sex. Also, any kind of sexual activity comes with unforeseen emotional and psychological consequences.

These consequences have Dr. McIlhane worried.

"Sex is more dangerous than smoking," he said. "Sex hurts them while they're teen-agers. Smoking will hurt them later."

To try to ward teen-agers off from these dangerous consequences, the Medical Institute recently produced a video, "Sex Is Not a Game," to inform teens about the consequences of sex and challenge them to take responsibility for their own sexual health.

The film features five teen-agers talking about their sexual experiences. One girl talks about the humiliation of having vaginal warts as a teen-ager, and another talks about how she has to say "no" to sex now because she has genital herpes.

One teen-age guy wonders why he should make any effort to be sexually pure now, since he was molested as a boy. Another tries to convince himself that it is OK to lie about whether he has been tested for STDs because "it's just a big deal if you're not getting any, right?"

Though the film does not specifically address the issue, the accompanying discussion guide advocates postponing sexual activity until marriage with an uninfected partner as the only way to be safe. Medical Institute Executive Vice President Curt Stine says abstinence until marriage is "universally a healthy message."

"We say marriage is a health issue," he said.