

Sex-ed conferees cite ignorance of diseases

By Cheryl Wetzstein
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Dr. Felicia Stewart illustrates the fallacy of "safe sex" with a story of a nervous phone call she received a few weeks ago from a college coed in her 20s.

The young woman said she'd had sexual relations with a college boyfriend, using a condom, but now had red blisters on her private parts. She wanted to know what it could possibly be.

"I told her it sounded like genital herpes" and she should consult a doctor, Dr. Stewart said, recounting the conversation last week at a Capitol Hill seminar on teen-pregnancy prevention and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

"I can't believe it," she said, according to Dr. Stewart. "I had no idea that if I used a condom I could still catch something. I would have never decided to sleep with this guy if I had known that using a condom wouldn't prevent disease."

The educate-and-protect vs. learn-how-to-abstain debate over how U.S. society should respond to its growing STD problem is only just beginning.

But unlike teen pregnancy, which has received widespread attention, STDs remain a misunderstood and ignored subject.

Dr. Stewart, director of reproductive health programs for the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation of Menlo Park, Calif., says few people — even those who have had sex education in school — know much about STDs.

More and better STD education is needed immediately, she told the seminar convened by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, the Association of Reproductive Health Professionals and National Adolescent Reproductive Health Partnership.

If adults wait to talk about it "too long," the children "get too old and it's too late," Dr. Stewart added.

Others would say that situations like the aforementioned young woman's underscore the need for sexual abstinence until marriage.

Contraceptives have significant drawbacks in preventing pregnancy and disease, Dr. Joe S. McIlhaney, president of the Medical Institute for Sexual Health, told *The Washington Times* in an interview.

The only safe sex, said Dr. McIlhaney, who is leading a drive to promote abstinence and character

education, is within marriage, which presumes one sex partner, or in a similar kind of lifelong, mutually monogamous relationship.

Ignorance is perilous for the nation, as STDs carry tremendous health and economic consequences, says a 1996 report by the Institute of Medicine titled "The Hidden Epidemic: Confronting Sexually Transmitted Diseases."

Teens are especially vulnerable to STDs because they often become sexually active so young and have multiple partners. About two-thirds of those who acquire STDs are under age 25, says the "Hidden Epidemic."

It further says:

- 12 million Americans, including 3 million teens, become infected with an STD each year.

- America has the highest rates of gonorrhea and syphilis in the developed world — 150 cases per 100,000 persons and 6.3 cases per 100,000 persons, respectively, in 1995.

- STDs are not a "stationary" group of infections: Eight new sexually transmitted pathogens have been identified since 1980.

- STDs can cause serious life-threatening complications, such as cancers, as well as infertility, ectopic pregnancy, spontaneous abortion, stillbirth, low-birth-weight babies, and neurologic damage.

- The social cost of STDs is about \$10 billion a year. This figure rises to \$17 billion a year if costs related to the human immunodeficiency virus, which causes AIDS, are included.

A national "system" to prevent and treat STDs should be established, Thomas R. Eng, editor of "The Hidden Epidemic," told the teen-pregnancy seminar last week.

Such a system should encourage "healthy sexual behaviors," such as delaying sexual intercourse and condom use, especially among teens and young adults, Mr. Eng said. It would also provide more training to health professionals and educators and more funding for STD prevention.

Heritage Foundation analyst Patrick Fagan, another seminar speaker, disagreed that a massive "school-based" system was the best answer.

The two greatest protections a child can have, he said, are to grow up with married parents and to attend regular religious worship.