

Editorial for ***The Annals of Pharmacotherapy***
Condoms and STDs

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Many of our patients and colleagues will be surprised and disturbed by the latest revelation from the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). For more than a decade, the CDC has been promoting “safe sex,” a message apparently based solely on the *hope* that condoms are effective.

This hope was discredited in mid-July when the NIH released the “Scientific Evidence on Condom Effectiveness for STD Prevention,” commissioned in June 2000 by then House member, Dr. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.). The report disclosed that the body of medical research shows no evidence that condoms protect against most sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). I refer to the CDC’s “hope” because its recommendations have not been based on good science, but rather on theoretical models, possibly unduly influenced by a strong bias that condoms would prove to be effective.

Even in those STDs (including HIV/AIDS and male gonorrhea) where the NIH now report “evidence for the effectiveness of condoms” (p. 14), the definition of “effectiveness” needs further scrutiny. Using the NIH criteria, reducing the number of bullets in a gun’s chamber from 6 to 1 would be “effective” in reducing death while playing a game of Russian Roulette. But such a recommendation for effectiveness seems ludicrous. It is the risky behavior (playing either Russian Roulette or sexual roulette) that must be addressed.

For the few healthcare professionals who closely followed research on condoms, the CDC’s “safe sex” recommendations have caused a dilemma. It has

been most difficult to convince patients to avoid high-risk behavior when they constantly heard the CDC media-driven message to carry on, just use a condom.

More worrisome than the loss of confidence in the CDC is the misery inflicted on the trusting public who accepted its advice and now suffer (or have died) as a result. By following the CDC's unsubstantiated conclusions, these patients could be labeled victims of condom propaganda.

Underlying the mind-set of the CDC's "safe sex" campaign could be a dangerous and condescending attitude presuming that people within certain demographic groups will mindlessly succumb to raging hormones or societal pressures. We have all heard the phrase, "They're going to have sex away." Using condoms for mere damage control, medicine has fallen below our responsibility to treat our patients with the finest care and dignity.

Sadly for many, the public may be slow to hear this new information that condoms do not provide safe sex. Too few major media outlets highlighted the latest report. Those that did, did so off the front page. With so much disease and so many lives at stake, do we not have a moral obligation to shout this warning from the housetops? Our children's and neighbors' lives and health are at stake.

So what should we now conclude about "safe sex"? Since condoms are not the answer, what should we advise? The answer is something that societies of past generations knew and advocated – lifelong monogamy. Most people called it marriage – abstinence before and faithfulness within. This "safe sex" has a proven track record for personal and public health.

Workshop Summary: Scientific Evidence on Condom Effectiveness for Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) Prevention. June 20, 2001. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, National Institutes of Health, Department of Health and Human Services.