Media and Contraception

Position Paper of the Society for Adolescent Medicine

Adolescent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are major public health concerns in the United States. Each year one million teenagers become pregnant, over 90% of those pregnancies are unintended, and almost one-third end in abortion (1). Infants born to adolescents have lower birth weights and are at greater risk for abuse, neglect, and poor academic performance (2,3). Adolescent mothers are less likely to complete high school and more likely to seek welfare assistance (4). Two-thirds of the 12 million Americans who acquire a STD each year are younger than age 25 years (5). Adolescents have disproportionately high rates for gonorrhea, chlamydia, and syphilis, and AIDS is now the sixth leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year olds (6). Clearly, effective interventions are needed.

Although most adults and adolescents believe that young people should abstain from sexual intercourse until after they graduate from high school, there is widespread support for providing youth with contraceptive information and education (8–10). Furthermore, societal concern regarding AIDS has increased the perceived need for promoting condom use through the media (11).

The Society for Adolescent Medicine supports the expanded use of print and electronic media to advertise and promote the appropriate use of contraceptives. Throughout the world, media have influenced knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors regarding use of contraception (12). In the 1970s, American researchers demonstrated that television messages could increase awareness about contraceptives, and this increase was proportional to the amount of money spent on advertising (13). Since then, numerous effective public health campaigns have addressed contraception. Many believe the low rates of unwanted pregnancy and abortion in The Netherlands stem from the effects of public media sources in providing information about different forms of contraception (14). Even among traditional societies within developing countries (e.g., Mali, Kenya, and Nigeria), mass media campaigns using newspaper, radio, and television have resulted in positive and significant changes in contraceptive knowledge, attitudes, and practice (15–17).

The Society for Adolescent Medicine supports the inclusion of program content that models healthy and responsible sexual behavior among adolescents. The mass media, which often use sexual content and innuendo to sell programs and products (18,19), should portray the responsible use of contraceptives. Beyond public service announcements and commercial advertisements, program content needs to incorporate responsible and healthy sexual behaviors among adolescent media characters. In addition to communicating the risky consequences of unprotected sexual activity and promoting abstinence, the mass media can offer information on available health services and methods of contraception. As a salient example, only 1% of U.S. women have ever used, and only 11% have ever heard of, emergency contraception (20). Mass media could be very effective in educating sexually active adolescents and young adults about this method of contraception.

The Society for Adolescent Medicine encourages the design of targeted health messages across different media to convey information regarding use of contraception. Renewed efforts are needed to produce and disseminate culturally appropriate and educationally tailored contraception messages for adolescents. Television is an important medium because it has the ability to reach widespread and diverse audiences; however, effective health campaigns often employ multiple communication chan-
nels (21). Further research is needed on adolescents' use of newer media resources; for example, the Internet could serve as an effective tool in reaching adolescents with preventive health messages. The eventual goal should be the creation of an information environment in which contraceptive use is the social norm.

References


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