

Mexicans, Aids and the Condom

Before the menace of AIDS no one could imagine that use of the condom would extend as much as it has today. Since the times when it was designed for contraceptive use, the invention of chemical and other products to avoid non-desired pregnancies, seemed to put the condom out of fashion. Journalist Patricia Aridjis reminds us here of the role of condom use in preventing AIDS, the way people accept or reject it, and other details and figures about that terrible malady.

Patricia Aridjis

Condom use in Mexico is not frequent, although 90% of Mexicans with AIDS have contracted it sexually.

When the malady first appeared, homosexuals were the group most affected, and many of them began to take preventive measures. In contrast, the rest of the population believed that it was not a health problem that concerned them. The result is that half of those who now have AIDS are heterosexuals, 50% of whom are women, and of these, 10% are housewives.

In addition to abstinence and mutual fidelity, over the last years the rubber condom has been considered the most effective method against AIDS. Statistics on condom use in Mexico, although imprecise, indicate that the number of condom users is low, fluctuating between 1 percent and 7 percent of the sexually active population.

Some people claim they do use condoms. Proving how many of them are telling the truth is a little difficult. What is undeniable is the high index of those who have contracted AIDS sexually. Those who openly reject condom use tend to

Journalist

argue, half joking, whole in earnest, that loss of sensitivity during sex "is like taking a bath with a raincoat or like forcing a child to eat sweets wrapped in plastic". Casanova, the famous 18th century gigolo, surely would not have agreed with these statements. For him, using the condom removed a great weight from his shoulders. "It is the English vestment that gives peace of mind", he once said.

Dr. Patricia Uribe, of the National Council for AIDS Prevention (CONASIDA), believes that reticence to use condoms is due, among other things, to the fact that "among adults it is very difficult to change habits, above all when it is a matter of sexual habits".

What does it mean to use a condom? Sometimes distrust, sometimes holding back. The housewife, for example, cannot easily insist that her spouse use it.

"For this reason it's important to inculcate the use of the condom from formative stages. I do not think that youth are very highly aware. They know perfectly well what a condom is, but few use it. This is shown in the high number of pregnant adolescents, who obviously did not protect themselves. It is what is called children having children."

Conservatives Insist It's Immoral

Some non-governmental groups and CONASIDA itself, through Dr. Patricia Uribe, propose an alternative on how to convince people of the benefits of condom use. "We view it as a medicine and we must change this image. The mental phase is very important in sexuality, so the condom needs to be eroticized. Incorporating it into sexual play can be very enjoyable, it does not decrease pleasure and at the same time, it protects.

"If cigarettes, Coca Cola, and everything that is not inherently erotic has been eroticized, why not something that is related to sexuality?" asks Dr. Uribe. We, on the other hand, ask:

Why is it that this twist hasn't been given earlier to the campaign against AIDS? Is it because the country's more conservative groups have prevented it?

The official spokesman of the Mexican Catholic church, Genaro Alamilla, stated in 1987 that the campaign against AIDS "will promote homosexuality and loss of values that the Mexican people have managed to preserve in spite of everything. Also it will increase prostitution and will induce young people to begin sexual activity when they still are not physically or mentally prepared". More recently (September 1990), the National Parents' Union (UNPF) stated that this campaign "pol-

lutes the morality of adolescents". The UNPF demands the resignation of the director of CONASIDA, Dr. Jaime Sepulveda Amor, because "he promotes condom use among young people and children, a situation that is detrimental for minors. The campaign is acceptable for homosexuals or bisexuals but it should not be extended to the rest of the population, especially not to young people and children. It must be concentrated exclusively on high risk groups." Also Jorge Serrano Limón, who heads the ultraconservative group PROVIDA, has voiced his thoughts on numerous occasions, rating the use of the condom as "immoral".

Patricia Uribe says that these are minority groups and that they do not stand in the way of the work of CONASIDA. "Their stance is valid. They promote abstinence and mutual monogamy as the sole alternative in their community. The Public Health sector has to be realistic. Not all people opt for either of those two options, which is why other possibilities must be offered and one of them, of course, is condom use", she states.

Nevertheless, there are sectors that believe the CONASIDA campaigns have not been open, and that they have not been sufficiently explicit.

Don't Help Me, Brother

In August 1990 the National Consumer's Institute (INCO) carried out quality tests

on 26 brands of condoms that are sold in the country (9 Mexican and 17 imported). The lot was made up of 3,100 condoms acquired in different zones of Mexico City, in the same way that any consumer might get them. The experiments were suggested by the National Union of Consumers' Organizations. The results were published in the newspaper *El Nacional* and in the magazine *Examen*. The latter publication noted repeatedly that "these tests far exceed the norms required in our country". Why they are so rigorous is never explained. In contrast, they do demonstrate the failures in detail. Part of the article is summarized below.

It was found that:

Brands cancelled long ago by the Health Ministry were on sale.

Condoms with expired shelf life date were on sale.

There were condoms on sale that did not have an expiration date and/or date of manufacture, and none included instructions saying "Do not use after such month in such year", or "Store in a cool, dry place". More than half the imported brands had clear plastic packaging. In this way, light and ultraviolet rays may easily affect the condom, speeding up the aging process.

Some condoms were poorly finished and had small holes.

More than half the lot passed mechanical and ageing tests. In contrast, four national brands and six imported ones did not pass the stretching test; after ageing, they broke.

The brands Supermacho and Life-styles got the highest ratings and the lowest, Argis and Tahiti. (The first and third were national brands, and the second and last, imported.)

Finally, the article in *Examen* concluded that in spite of the rigor of the tests, 19 types of packaging of imported condoms and three national ones met the required standard of quality.

Handle with Care

Dr. Patricia Uribe discards the possibility that the failures are due to manufacture. "There is good quality control in prophylactics. We have been to exhibitions where they have been tested with great water pressures. Rather I believe that the error is in storage and use. People carry them in the subway, in their pants pocket, with friction, heat and humidity".

If condom storage conditions are good, its useful life fluctuates between two to five years. Conditions that may contribute to the deterioration of a prophylactic are:

The contraceptive for men...
from responsible couples

Sólo
para manejo
en tiendas

Rotektor

El anticonceptivo
sólo para hombres...
de parejas responsables





EL SIDA
Si...da

Mexican health authorities frequently play on words in their AIDS prevention campaigns

- Extreme temperatures. In a storeroom with a zinc roof in a warm climate, temperatures may exceed 60 C. In some countries, prophylactics are stored in these conditions for up to five years.

- Humidity. Sealed packages may come open, allowing insects, mold or fungi to enter.

- Light. Ultraviolet rays, generated by the sun and florescent lamps, reduce condom effectiveness within hours, for this reason transparent wrappings are not recommendable.

- Ozone

- Abrasion (action and effect of wearing something out, through friction)

- Flattening

- Prolonged storage in wallets and tight pockets.

Latex (rubber tree sap) condoms are a barrier against sexually transmitted dis-

eases such as gonorrhea, chlamydia infections and AIDS. It has been scientifically proven that the microorganism responsible for these infections cannot penetrate latex condoms, which are generally between 30 to 70 micrometers thick. Its molecules overlap, producing a barrier effect with a magnitude calculated to be a thousand times smaller than the size of the AIDS virus, so that there is no doubt about the protection that it offers.

However, its effectiveness varies depending on the type of sexual practice, the quality of the prophylactic, the conditions of its storage, handling during transport as well as individual handling.

Condoms in Mexican Society

Our system of sexual education deals with a double moral standard. On the one hand, the media bombards us constantly and indiscriminately with subliminal and not so subliminal messages. Sex and sexuality emanate from products and attitudes of men and women in an infinite number of programs and commercials.

On the other hand, the Mexican society is mostly Catholic, with deep-rooted conservative customs, which do not allow formal sexual education to be more complete and open. As an example, it is enough to remember the negative reactions provoked long ago by the introduction of sexual topics into primary school textbooks. We have also already mentioned the conservative groups' disapproval of campaigns organized by the Health sector and non-governmental groups against AIDS. Furthermore, our culture does not allow for a woman to exercise very active participation when it comes to sex. How many women are incapable of having an orgasm for fear of being judged if they take the initiative during sex? Many women do not even dare to suggest the use of a condom for a simple cultural reason: the man defines the terms of the relationship. The use of the condom is not a moral question, it is a matter of health. To substitute the psychological barrier with a true protective barrier is almost the only way to stop a disease that over a short period of time has become pandemic. Sexual preference is unimportant, the risk is latent at all times.

In 1988 for every 23 men with AIDS, there was one woman.

In 1989 for every 9 men with AIDS, there was one woman.

In 1990 for every 4 men with AIDS, there was one woman. ■