AIDS: Focus on Youth

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Has AIDS disappeared? You might think so if you were the student who asked this question or many like her in Canadian communities.

In the late 80s and early 90s, AIDS was still relatively new. The epidemic was evolving quickly. At a time of health services restructuring, when the future of public health may have been considered tenuous, AIDS created a climate of excitement and urgency. Enthusiasm sparked imaginations and led to the creation of programs that were innovative and far reaching. In 1990, every child would have heard about AIDS, if not in school, then through TV, radio or magazines. Since then, the energy and enthusiasm that surrounded AIDS has faded for many public health workers in Canada. Our attention has been diverted as the stresses of restructuring have placed AIDS in a catalogue of priorities that is ever expanding. Youth who learned the “Facts of Life” in the early 90s wonder if they still should be concerned and ask where they can get the support they need to act on the safe choices they were encouraged to make. In some communities the facts about AIDS are still a mystery to younger children.

We know AIDS has not disappeared. Up to December 1997, it was estimated that 41,681 people had tested positive for HIV in Canada and the total number of AIDS cases was estimated to be 20,000.¹² Although the annual reports of AIDS cases and deaths have been declining in recent years,¹ this is most likely attributable to improved treatments and delayed onset of disease.

AIDS has certainly not disappeared for the young; in Canada, the incidence of AIDS is steadily increasing among youth.²

We know that the proportion of AIDS cases attributed to injection drug use is increasing annually with the greatest increase in the youngest age group.² Worldwide, at least a third of the 30,000,000 people estimated to be infected with HIV are 10 to 24 years old and every day an estimated 7,000 young people are infected with the virus.³

Young people are particularly vulnerable to the risks of acquiring HIV infection. They are exploring their environment beyond the safety of their home. They are seeking new experiences and testing their own boundaries as well as those of their parents and communities. However they often receive confusing messages. They are encouraged to explore, but are confined by standards and stereotypes that they feel powerless to effect. They are taking risks in all aspects of their lives. Often their behaviour is governed by formidable social pressures that they are not prepared to confront. Their world offers opportunities and choices, but we have not always made it possible for them to learn the skills they need to make the safest decisions. Nor do we offer support for their choices. Every day they are challenged by pictures and models that contradict the concepts of safety and health.

Risk behaviour among young people in Canada is still prevalent in spite of early efforts. Approximately 44% of youth between the ages of 15 and 19 are sexually active, many of these reporting having had sex without a condom.⁴ Among those who are sexually active, 47% of young men and 32% of young women report two or more partners in the previous year.⁴ In the US, a study of 65,000 adolescents indicated that approximately 10% of youth initiated sexual intercourse by the age of 13.⁵ Sexually transmitted disease rates directly reflect the prevalence of unsafe sexual behaviour. Young women between the ages of 15 and 19 have the highest rates of infection for chlamydia and gonorrhea in Canada.⁶ Worldwide, about half of the STD cases reported every year are in the under 25 age group.⁷

Youth in general are at increased risk of acquiring HIV infection, but there are young people who are even more susceptible. Globally, young girls often are defenseless in social structures which promote subordinate and dependency relationships between males and females. Street youth often must use the sex trade as a means of survival. They are also immersed in a subculture where drugs and alcohol are added threats. Young homosexuals seldom find acceptance and support in their families or communities, and often seek affection in environments that intensify the risks for HIV infection. Children who have been abused have experiences that undermine their confidence and limit their expectations for safe and healthy relationships. Compounding the added risk for these groups is the difficulty in reaching them with conventional education and support programs.

HIV in the young is a discouraging picture. Our lethargy in recent years in addressing HIV has helped to paint that picture, but there is light in the landscape. We know that prevention works. High risk behaviours have decreased and safe behaviours have increased in many populations that have participated in HIV prevention activities. We have created exciting programs that have enhanced knowledge and have helped to create supportive environments for youth. The CPHA Safe Spaces project is an example of how to engage youth in meeting their needs. The countries of the South have been particularly innovative in their involvement of youth in program development and in the creation of youth-focused services. The Ammor Street Youth Clinic in Brazil⁸ and the Child to Child projects in the Philippines are good models for participatory programming.⁸ Innovative technology is making information more accessible to youth.

We must build on these accomplishments and revitalize the public health approach to AIDS prevention. The National AIDS Strategy has been renewed.
Sida : pleins feux sur les jeunes

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Le sida a-t-il disparu? C’est peut-être ce que vous pèrseriez si vous étiez l’étudiante qui a posé cette question ou l’une des nombreuses personnes comme elle dans les collectivités canadiennes.

À la fin des années 1980 et au début des années 1990, le sida était une maladie encore relativement nouvelle. L’épidémie évoluait rapidement. En pleine période de réforme des services de santé, alors que l’avenir de la santé publique pouvait être considéré comme précaire, le sida a créé un climat d’urgence et d’exaltation. L’enthousiasme a avivé l’imagination et a suscité la création de programmes vastes et innovateurs. En 1990, tous les enfants entendaient parler du sida, sinon à l’école, par la télévision, la radio ou les magazines. Depuis, l’énergie et l’enthousiasme des débuts de l’épidémie du sida se sont effrités pour de nombreux travailleurs de la santé publique au Canada. Notre attention a été détournée à cause du stress de la réforme qui a relégué le sida dans une liste de priorités qui ne cesse de s’allonger. Les jeunes à qui on a enseigné les «réalités de la vie» au début des années 1990 se demandent aujourd’hui s’ils doivent toujours se préoccuper et veulent savoir où obtenir les techniques dont ils ont besoin pour opter pour les décisions sans danger. Nous ne leur avons pas toujours donné les moyens d’acquérir les techniques dont ils ont besoin pour prendre des décisions sans danger. Nous ne les soutenons pas non plus dans leurs nouvelles expériences et repoussent leurs limites ainsi que celles de leurs parents et de leurs collectivités. Mais ils reçoivent souvent des messages contradictoires.

Ainsi, on les encourage à explorer tout en les limitant aux normes et en les enfermant dans les stéréotypes sur lesquels ils ont le sentiment de n’avoir aucune prise. Ils prennent des risques dans toutes les facettes de leurs vies. Leurs comportements sont souvent régis par de formidable pressions sociales qu’ils ne se sentent pas prêts à affronter. Leur monde leur offre des possibilités et des choix mais nous ne leur avons pas toujours donné les moyens d’acquérir les techniques dont ils ont besoin pour prendre des décisions sans danger. Nous ne les soutenons pas non plus dans leurs choix. Ainsi, ils sont tous les jours soumis à des images et à des modèles qui contredisent les concepts de sécurité et de santé.

En dépit des efforts initiaux, les comportements à risque chez les jeunes Canadiens restent prévalents. Approximativement 44 % des jeunes entre 15 et 19 ans ont une sexualité active et un grand nombre d’entre eux déclarent avoir des relations sexuelles sans condom. Parmi ceux qui sont sexuellement actifs, 47 % des...