

Reform needed to halt spread of sexual diseases

INADEQUATE SEX EDUCATION IS TO BLAME FOR THE ALARMING RATES OF STIS AMONG TEENS, **STEPHANIE HARRINGTON** INVESTIGATES.

SEX education in many Australian schools is inadequate and ad hoc and introducing a national age-appropriate curriculum is crucial to reduce the alarming rates of sexually transmitted infections among teenagers, health experts say.

Health groups from across Australia are pushing for comprehensive, but age-appropriate sex education to start in primary school. This could include information on domestic violence, sexual consent, popular culture and relationships, in addition to lessons on contraception, sexual health and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

The Australian Medical Association's (AMA) Victorian branch has made a submission to the State Government to spend \$19.45 million over four years to trial better sex education in schools and supply more information to parents about sexual health and relationships. Teachers providing sex education would also be properly trained for the job, under the proposal.

"Young people, parents and teachers often lack basic information about sexual health. School sexuality education in Australia is inconsistently delivered with teachers not necessarily trained for the task," the AMA says.

Victorian AMA vice-president Zoe Wainer says given that the median age for sexual activity is between 16 to 17 years old, students should begin learning about basic biology and relationships from as young as age 10.

"We need to start teaching sexual health education before people start having sex. There are some fantastic sex education programs in schools and some not as good as they should be," she says. "The consequence of patchy and inconsistent sex education is higher teen pregnancy rates and STI levels, which are increasing alarmingly. Education can prevent and assist young people to make educated decisions around these areas."

Associate professor Anne Mitchell, from La Trobe University's Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, says it will also likely call for a national approach to sex education when the fourth National Survey



Health groups are calling for a national age-appropriate curriculum for sex education. But many schools may not be up to the task.

of Secondary Students and Sexual Health is released in May. The survey, which has been ongoing over 15 years, investigates the sexual behaviour and attitudes of thousands of students in Year 10 and 12 every five years.

"I'm pretty sure one of the [survey] outcomes will be we'll call for a national curriculum for this area. [Teenagers] have been positive about school being a good authority on sexual health information, but not all of them get it. It is so inconsistent."

Regardless of whether they receive the right information at school, teenagers are having sex. About 30 per cent of Year 10 students and 50 per cent of Year 12 students are sexually active, Mitchell says. More teenagers are engaging in oral sex, she says. Another 20 per cent of Year 12 students have not had any sexual contact.

"We're truly confident a proportion of young people from age 16 on are sexually active. Anxiety about what we teach at school and destroying their innocence is well and truly gone."

Mitchell says age-appropriate sex

education should be taught from prep onward, as in the Netherlands. Young children could learn about families, friendships and "a bit about where babies come from", she says. Schools should help older students develop an "ethical self" to deal with issues around violence, relationships and unwanted or coerced sex, she says.

The role of technology in students' sexual lives is another emerging issue. A recent US survey showed one in five teens were sending nude or semi-nude photos of themselves via email or mobile phones. "We're way behind the eight-ball on this. We haven't got any teaching resources to deal with this issue in schools," Mitchell says.

University of NSW professor Catharine Lumby says it is important to have a dialogue with young people on issues including popular culture, rather than a panicked response that shuts conversation down.

"I strongly believe we need sex education that is not solely focused on things like sexual health and contraception in our high schools,

but that from a young age, in an age-appropriate way, we start dealing with ideas of respectful relationships and eventually with love and sexuality."

Of particular concern to health groups is the high level of unsafe sex teenagers are engaging in, particularly when drugs and alcohol are involved. Rates of STIs are skyrocketing, especially chlamydia.

Jill Michelson, operations manager of Marie Stopes International, says there were more than 58,500 notifications of chlamydia nation-wide in 2008, up from more than 16,000 in 2000. "Over 15,000 [of recent notifications] are recorded for males and females under 19 years of age. That's a fairly concerning statistic," she says.

Schools have an important role to play in educating students about the dangers of infections such as chlamydia, which, if left untreated, can cause infertility, Michelson says. Yet a Marie Stopes survey released last year found that one in 10 teenagers had missed out on sex education at school. More than half of parents and teenagers in the survey rated the quality of sex education at school as average or poorer, she says.

For example, only 39 per cent of students learned about the emotional aspects of sex, while 43 per cent of students were taught about non-consensual sex, Michelson says. "Again, getting a proper, across the board message to our teenagers is not necessarily occurring," she says.

The level of skill and confidence teachers bring to the classroom can make a difference. Mitchell says there needs to be better professional development and pre-service education for teachers to deal with issues around sex education.

"There are lots of very capable and inspirational sexual health teachers out there. But you also get new teachers who are under-confident and inexperienced and they improve when they have training," she says.

Jeff Emmel, executive director of the Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation, admits the quality of pre-service education for

teachers in this area "varies immensely across the country".

"Some teachers are not prepared to [teach sex ed] and they don't have the confidence to do it," he says.

Although Emmel says there is logic to the argument that sex education should be included in the national curriculum, it may not be realistic. "Unfortunately, there are many, many pressures on schools to undertake a whole range of activities. The curriculum is crowded, in the primary schools in particular."

Many parents would be critical of any move to standardise sex education in schools. Ian Dalton, executive director of the Australian Parents' Council, the peak body for non-government school parents, is concerned schools are taking on roles that should be parents' responsibility. Rather than crowding more into the curriculum, health groups need to work closely with parents to provide them with the right information, he says.

"Schools exist to assist the parents in their role as the first educators. When you start venturing into activities that are taking away their parental responsibility, then you're starting to get into very difficult territory. I would argue that curriculum for sex education is best left as close as possible to the local level. The only way you could appropriately construct a national curriculum around sex education would be at a very, very basic level," he says.

The Victorian Government, which will be considering the AMA's funding proposal for the May budget, says that sex education is part of the "comprehensive health education curriculum". But it is important to treat it as a shared responsibility between parents and schools, an Education Department spokeswoman says.

Emmel says sex education is a "minefield" for schools, which must be sensitive to religious and cultural differences. But Lumby insists schools need to teach students about sex: "Not all parents are prepared to engage at this level with their kids. It's too important to leave this to chance."

Relationship education moves focus from the 'plumbing' of sexual education

CONCERNS that sex education in schools focuses too much on the "plumbing" and not enough on relationships may soon change when the Federal Government announces its plan to fund respectful relationships education.

Moira Carmody, a member of the National Council to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children, hints that the Commonwealth is due to make a big announcement regarding relationships education in schools.

"The Federal Government does have a very big commitment to rolling out what is being called respectful relationships education, which is basically violence prevention education, but to work very closely with existing curricula around issues to do with sexuality," Carmody says.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd committed to respectful relationships

education across schools as part of a national plan to prevent violence against women and children at the council's launch last June. (A government spokesman confirmed an announcement was pending, but would not release any policy details at the time of publication.)

Carmody, a University of Western Sydney associate professor, who led a three-year study into sexual intimacy among 16-25 year olds in 2006, says young people are given little direction about how to manage relationships and negotiate intimacy.

"Interviews I did with young people showed most of [sex education] was about 'plumbing'. They wanted to know how to deal with issues around consent, how to communicate their needs and desires and how to deal with situations that were difficult and where they felt pressured," she says.

Carmody has since developed a course on sex and ethics, which is now being adopted in New Zealand. She suggests Australia could also implement her program, which includes information on relationships, sexual assault prevention and ethical decision making.

But some states are already taking the lead in addressing these issues.

Since 2003, more than 70 schools have been involved in SHine South Australia's Focus Schools Program, a comprehensive sex education initiative delivered to Year 8, 9 and 10 students. Helen Rawnsley, schools' program coordinator for the government-funded agency, says much of SHine's curriculum focuses on relationships, gender, relationship violence and sexualisation in the media.

"We know the kids want to talk about these issues with each

other, with a trusted adult in a safe environment," she says. "Sexual health is a small component."

The program is working. In 2008, 83 per cent of the 736 students who had completed the SHine program rated the course overall as good to excellent. The more than 180 teachers, counsellors and school staff who participated in SHine's training program last year were also much more confident in teaching about relationships and sexual health, a survey found.

Clare High School teacher Tamara Buddle says many students initially had the wrong information about sex and relationships from friends and the media. "[SHine] is a good balance between providing factual information, but also allowing the kids to express their own opinions and beliefs," she says.



PM Kevin Rudd has made a commitment to fund respectful relationships education in schools.