

# CSWS

## Research Matters

### Condom Use Saves Lives: SO WHY IS IT BEING DISCOURAGED?

BY S. MARIE HARVEY



**W**hen the time comes for a sexually active couple to make a decision about condom use, there's no doubt that the man is in control. Condoms are, after all, anatomically male-driven, so even if a woman is determined to use the safest method for protecting herself from possible sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV, she must rely on her male partner's willingness to use a condom.

This power dynamic in condom use was very much on my mind when, in 1997, I began a six-year research project entitled PARTNERS. The study was funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and was designed to implement and evaluate an intervention that could possibly prevent unintended pregnancy, HIV infection, and other STIs among women and their main male partners. We speculated that ideas of romantic love, commitment, monogamy, and other hard-to-measure factors play strong roles in how a couple communicates, and contribute to the ability of a woman to ask or insist on the use of a protective condom.

In the end, after interviewing and evaluating nearly 150 Latino couples, the findings suggest that: bringing couples together for education about the prevention of HIV, other STIs, and unintended pregnancy may be sufficient for changing their condom and contraceptive behavior. This interpretation of our findings is supported by results from a review of reproductive health interventions that indicated programs targeted at couples were more effective than those targeted at only one partner.

Studies like ours are important because if you help couples understand the reasons to use condoms, lives can be saved. Safe sex is a critical component in turning around alarming trends. For example, women now comprise 30 percent of new HIV infections and 23 percent of new cases of AIDS in this country.

The problem with producing the positive and useful results from our research—and similar studies going on in the nation—is that we're living under a political administration that has little interest in scientific inquiry. In fact, over the past five years, George W. Bush's administration has discouraged condom use rather than encouraged it, even in the face of solid scientific evidence that proves latex condoms—the only widely available means for controlling the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases—are 98 percent effective

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in preventing pregnancy and 90 percent effective in stopping the transmission of HIV.

In 2002, representatives from the Bush administration ordered the discontinuation of a fact sheet on the CDC website that included information on proper condom use, the effectiveness of condoms, and studies that show condom education does not promote sexual activity. What information took its place? A document emphasizing condom failure rates and the effectiveness of abstinence. President Bush has also packed the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS with condom opponents. Currently, not one scientist sits on the board, nor is a single member a person infected with the HIV virus. Furthermore, a study undertaken by the U.S. House of Representatives found that eleven national abstinence-only programs, used by two-thirds of federal grantees in schools throughout the U.S., contained “false, misleading, or distorted information about reproductive health.” One of the major falsehoods common in abstinence-only programs is the claim that condoms are not effective in preventing sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. In its review of the scientific literature, the study authors concluded that, “Youth who pledge abstinence are significantly less likely to make



informed choices about precautions when they do have sex.”

Though the administration’s anti-condom stance is not supported by science and favored by only 15 percent of U.S. citizens, it is well funded. The president asked for an additional \$39 million for abstinence-only sex education programs in his fiscal year 2006 budget, bringing the amount spent in the current fiscal year to \$206 million. And these programs don’t merely suggest that abstinence is more preferable than condom use. In order to qualify for federal funding, an agency must agree to teach that

the *only* way to prevent sexually transmitted infection is abstinence.

The problem with an abstinence-only approach is obvious. People don’t always abstain, even if they pledge to. And when they do enter into sexual relationships without knowledge or information, they are less likely to make good decisions about protecting themselves from unintended pregnancy and disease. The number of HIV infections, as well as other STIs, continues to rise in this country and our young people are increasingly unprepared to take the steps necessary to ensure a healthy future.