

Condom users in Central Sydney

Recently we reported an evaluation of an HIV/AIDS education program that used the innovative strategy of local soccer clubs promoting condom use (Rissel, Elias-Schneider & Marthenas, 1997). The rationale for this strategy was that it would be more likely to reach men of all ages, but particularly younger men who are known to be the most at-risk group for STDs, and people from non-English speaking backgrounds.

The evaluation showed that the program was reasonably effective in communicating the program messages of safe sex and condom use to its target audience. Data were collected by interviewing randomly selected male soccer fans between 18 and 50 years attending three state-level games. In addition to the specific program evaluation questions, we took the opportunity to ask detailed questions about condom use on the last occasion of sex and whether this was with a regular or a new partner.

Key findings from these data were that 46.4% of men who had had sex reported that they had used a condom the last time they had vaginal or anal sex, with younger men more likely to have used a condom (Rissel, Elias-Schneider & Marthenas, 1997). This overall figure is double that reported in a large population sexual health survey in Britain (Johnson et al, 1994). In Britain, there was also a similar trend of decreasing condom use with increasing age, which is usually explained by marriage status.

We found that 27 of respondents

(19.6%) who had ever had sex (n=138) were identified to be at higher risk because of unprotected sex on the first occasion of sex with their most recent partner (within the last two years), or if they had had unprotected sex on the most recent occasion of sex with a partner who was not their regular partner (Rissel, Elias-Schneider & Marthenas, 1997).

One of the reviewers of that paper when submitted to the *Journal* made the point that the findings did not add very much to the literature, primarily because soccer spectators are not necessarily representative of the wider community. We agreed with this point, but obviously could not change our data. However, we now have some additional information which sheds more light on the situation.

In 1997, the New South Wales (NSW) Health Department began an annual Health Survey program. This program aims to survey by telephone 1,000 respondents randomly selected through random-digit dialling from each of the 16 Area Health Services in NSW. In addition to a core set of questions, each Area was able to ask up to three minutes of questions relevant to the local Area. In Central Sydney, the same questions asked of the soccer spectators were asked of randomly selected residents aged between 16 and 40 years (n=429).

In this recent population-based survey, we found that 41.2% of respondents (45.7% of men and 37.6% of women) had used a condom on the last occasion of sex, which is similar to the proportion of male soccer spectators identified as using condoms (46.4%). The frequency of condom use went down (39.1% of men and 33.2% of women) when

the last occasion of sex was with a regular partner. However, it dramatically increased to 82.15 of men and 100% of women when the last occasion of sex was with a new partner. Five men (17.9%) had unprotected sex with a new partner on the last occasion of sex, a similar level of risk as identified with the soccer spectators. Sixty-nine respondents had had a new sexual partner in the last 12 months, 55 (79.7%) of who had used a condom on the first occasion of sex with this new partner.

This new information is important for confirming that the soccer spectators who participated in our evaluation are similar to the general population in their

sexual health risk profile. Importantly, we have confirmed that men are more likely to be at risk of STDs and that the level of population risk is about 20%. Further work needs to be conducted to examine in more detail factors associated with greater risk that can be the target of health interventions.

References

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- Rissel, C., Elias-Schneider, A., & Marthenas, J. (1997). The 'PLAY IT SAFE' program - an evaluation of an HIV/AIDS awareness raising program for men from non-English speaking backgrounds using soccer as a vehicle in Sydney, Australia. *Australian Journal of Primary Health - Interchange*, 3(4), 90-99.

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