Sincerity ain't enough: Simple sexual-health advice for everyone

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If you have sex, that is, sexual intercourse, you are risking pregnancy and/or disease. The only safe sex is with condoms. Unsafe sex is sexual intercourse without condoms. The alternative is having no sex or solo sex.

It is that simple.

The current episodic sex scandal controversies that are filling the Thai daily news diet are strong indications that something is amiss with the way young Thais are being prepared for conducting safe and happy relationship and sexual lives.

Beyond the allegations, and the "he said, she said" charges that fly so unscrupulously onto everyone's gossip plate each morning, there are some compelling questions that arise about the state of healthy, comprehensive sexuality knowledge and awareness in Thailand.

Questions that arise include: Why don't people who fool around protect themselves? Do they have no knowledge of the risks they are running? Like the possibility of contracting any one of many sexually transmitted infections, including HIV? Or, the possibility of getting pregnant, or causing a pregnancy?

Astonishingly, in one of the popular cases recently, one party was quoted as saying that there was trust, "sincerity", between them, so no precautions were taken. It is amazing - and a bit frightening - that anyone, especially those who are reasonably well-educated and otherwise successful, could be either that ignorant or that foolhardy.

Rule of thumb No 1: If you are fooling around with someone who is fooling around on their regular partner or spouse, it means that they are lying to their partner/spouse. Why would you think that person would not, just as readily, lie to you?

Rule of thumb No 2: You cannot tell by looking at someone if they have a transmissible infection. It is even possible that they don't know it - yet. Let me repeat that: Just because someone "looks" healthy and "seems" okay, and says that they are "okay", does not mean anything! There is no assurance in those superficial observations.

It is important to remember that the person you are about to have sex with might be infected but he or she may not know it. He or she might honestly say: "Oh no, no problem for me", and they would be telling the truth, because they do not know. This is why it is risky to have unprotected sex with anyone.

It is that simple.

And while we talk a lot about HIV, we also have other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) to worry about, such as syphilis, gonorrhoea, herpes, HPV and chlamydia. The primary mode of transmission from one person to another is through sex.

There is evidence that few young people in Thailand receive adequate preparation for their sexual lives.
Statistics from Unaids in 2008 revealed that only 40 per cent of young people aged 15-24 have accurate knowledge about HIV and its modes of transmission. According to a Thai Health Promotion Foundation (SSS) survey of 2,060 students, between 9 to 18 years old, 65 per cent did not know ways for birth control, and 64 per cent did not know how to prevent sexual transmitted infections.

This is why Unesco and the National Science Museum of Thailand (NSM) have collaborated, with support from SSS and Unaids, and with help from Unifem and others to mount a year-long exhibition, entitled "Healthy Sexuality: The Story of Love" at the NSM in Pathum Thani. This is the first of its kind in Asia to take a frank and scientific approach to promoting healthy sexuality education using interactive multimedia presentations.

The exhibition is not only about sex; it is not a "how-to" exhibition. It is about healthy sexuality. This means that it includes topics on: love and romance, the biology and chemistry of love; relationships and communication; gender roles and identities; puberty, conception and childbirth; contraception, condoms and safe sex; sexual violence; and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

The exhibition strives to present the truth as accurately and non-judgementally as possible, to equip young people with the information they need so they can make smart, healthy choices for themselves, when they are ready to make those choices.

Although the exhibition is particularly intended for adolescents aged 10-19, it is, in fact, for everyone. And, from the clamour and interest in the current relationship and communication difficulties that some people in the media have been struggling through, it is clear that there is a need for everyone to brush up on their knowledge and understanding about all matters related to love, relationships and healthy sexuality.

The exhibition in Pathum Thani is open until July 2011. A website that will replicate the exhibition and offer much more information will be launched very soon at www.MuseumofSexuality.com.

If you choose to not have sex, that is absolutely safe. But, if you are going to have sex, you need to use condoms to be safe. It is that simple.

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