



## COMMISSIONER'S COMMENTS



### *Sex Through The Ages*

A satisfactory sex life is an essential ingredient for a full, happy and healthy life. What I have trouble with is the so-called “hook-up” culture where an emotional connection is not deemed to be a vital component of sex. I feel that’s wrong, not necessarily because of morality, but because it cannot be as wonderful an experience when not shared with love and affection.

I’ll try to briefly highlight some very important public health dimensions of sexual activity that are unique to three different age groups. First, I’ll focus on the teenager/young adult and next time on middle-aged adults and then seniors.

The dramatically increasing rates of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), in particular Chlamydia, are a very serious concern. Teenagers may be right that modern treatments make even human immune-deficiency virus (HIV) not the scary, life threatening disease it once was. Nonetheless, STDs can still have dramatic and lasting impacts on your life. Chlamydia causes inflammation of a young woman’s fallopian tubes, often leaving them scarred and blocked. For a young teenage girl, a future of infertility is something no young woman would welcome. Herpes virus exposure stays with you forever. For young men and women, having to explain to partners that they could infect them with Herpes could have a dampening effect on romance and relationships in the future. Use of condoms and limiting sexual partners is the best way to avoid these life-altering consequences. Schools, pediatricians, parents and your health department must ensure teenagers have this knowledge and conduct themselves in sensible ways.

Do teenage girls know that the most common gynecological cancer, cervical cancer, is caused by a virus transmitted through sex? Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) also causes unsightly warts on the external genitalia of both men and women. A series of 3 vaccinations is recommended for all pre-teens and teenagers...sexually active or not. Cervical cancer and genital warts are not very sexy.

Finally, a stroll down the aisle in any pharmacy reveals that there are quite a few products to treat vaginitis, or inflammation of the vagina. Although not necessarily a sexually transmitted disease, the culprit bacteria and protozoa cause an itchy and foul discharge and are often transmitted by sexual activity. Even if sex is your choice, a foul discharge with itch and burning isn’t very conducive to a pleasant sexual experience. Condoms would be protective and minimize these issues as well. It’s unfortunate that these precautions are necessary, but the consequences of not taking them are too serious to ignore.

Last but not least, unplanned pregnancy is something no one should ever have to deal with. Even if termination is the choice, it should never be a casual or trivial decision...because it is not.

For those of us in the middle years, my sympathies go out to us all. We are bombarded with advertisements for Viagra to treat “ED,” erectile dysfunction. How did the normal changes that occur as we journey from our 20’s to our 60’s become a disease? Of course I’m not referring to real sexual dysfunction that may occur during any age. The point I wish to make is that “ED” is a new disease created by the pharmacology industry resulting in widespread anxiety and concern. A very satisfying,

albeit marginally different, sex life is more than possible as we get older. The safety profile for Viagra is very wide and generally doesn't present any problems for those needing a little assistance. This is especially useful for some men on anti-hypertensive medications that can interfere with sexual activity as a side effect of treatment.

On the other hand, the current advertising promotion of testosterone for "low T" is unconscionable. Advertisements show men taking the medication without any testing or likelihood that they even have low testosterone. Using these various lotions and creams containing testosterone elevates your testosterone level accompanied by a dramatically increased risk of heart attack and stroke. The side effects are similar to those weight lifters get when they take anabolic steroids—aggression, irritability, acne and a decrease in your own natural or endogenous testosterone. Often testicular size will shrink significantly as your natural testosterone production diminishes from the use of external testosterone. On top of that, if you suddenly stop using testosterone after you start, you *will have* "low T" because you suppressed your own natural production. Testosterone replacement is only appropriate after proper testing to ensure you are one of the truly rare cases with lower than normal levels.

Women after menopause have their own set of issues. Evolutionary forces, besides eliminating the dinosaurs, have dictated that sex and reproduction be so closely linked that once reproductive activity ceases, there is no reason to have sex. Obviously we've evolved a little beyond that. Sex for women at or after the menopause is still a worthy objective. Unfortunately the vagina depends upon estrogen for elasticity and moisture. After menopause, which is marked by low estrogen, this can start to present problems. Over the counter products that moisturize, like Replens vaginal cream, can be a great help. Estrogen replacement would also address this issue but because of the associated risks it should be avoided in most cases. Besides these caveats, there is no reason not to have an enjoyable and satisfactory sex life as we age. Some gentle and safe assistance may be helpful.

For seniors, there's good news and bad news. The good news is that not only is sexual activity still a possibility, there are very few medical conditions that preclude continuing a fulfilling sex life. With the safety of Viagra and Cialis, more and more seniors are engaging in sex as they age.

The bad news is that because unwanted pregnancy is off the radar screen at this age, condoms are not frequently used with new relationships. The result is seniors are one of the groups with the greatest rise of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs). Syphilis alone increased in NY State by 30% from 2012 to 2013. Sex may not be a bad idea, but how about a condom? And don't forget the need to be screened periodically for other STD's.

In summary, sex may be a valid choice but let's keep it healthy.

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