

Too few practice safe sex, says study

BY DIANNE SHERMAN

Nearly one in five people — and men more than women — engage in sex without worrying about Aids, according to a survey in 14 countries.

A fourth of the 16 to 19-year-olds surveyed are not concerned about the virus and three in 10 failed to use any form of contraception the first time they had sex.

These and other statistics are contained in a report released by the world's largest condom manufacturer, Durex, which surveyed some 10,000 people between the ages of 16 and 45.

The report was released about ten days ago.

The countries surveyed include Australia, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, the Chinese special administrative region of Hong Kong, Italy, Mexico, Poland, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Thailand and the United States.

The survey ranked Australians, French, Russians and Americans as the most sexually-active people, jumping in bed with their partners at least once every three days.

Of the people interviewed almost half — 47 per cent — did not use contraception during their first sexual encounter.

The youngest, again the 16 to 19-year-olds, use condoms more frequently than those in other age groups.

Some 62 per cent had used the latex device in the past three months, while only 39 per cent of the 39-year-olds had done so.

The younger ones also tended to be sexually active earlier than the older generations and overwhelmingly think sex-education should be taught in school to pupils by the time they are 14.

On average, 16 to 19-year-olds from most countries became sexually active before turning 16.

People in all age groups started having sex at an average age of 17.6.

Americans were the most precocious, having sex as early as age 16.3 up from the previous year's 15.7.

French and Canadian respondents said they became lovers at 16.6 years old, while Germans on average said they had waited until age 17.4.

The Asians surveyed, from Hong Kong and Thailand, also waited until age 19.

These groups reported the highest satisfaction rate for the first



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time experience: 67 and 68 per cent respectively.

Nearly a fourth of the 16 to 19-year-olds would rather share the "birds and the bees" with their mothers, but only 14 per cent had succeeded in so doing.

Some 21 per cent would prefer talking to dad about it, but only five per cent had succeeded.

Everyone surveyed had heard of Aids but not necessarily other sexually-transmitted diseases such as chlamydia, which can cause sterility in women.

More than half of all respondents — 65 per cent — worry about contracting HIV, the virus that causes Aids, but nearly one in five — 17 per cent — had no fears at all, many because they do not

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consider themselves in high risk categories.

Durex conducts the sex survey annually.

About 1.6 million children worldwide were orphaned last year as a result of the Aids pandemic, the executive director of the United Nations Programme on HIV/Aids (UNAids) has said, reports Mike Mwaniki.

Dr Peter Piot urged governments to improve the conditions of children infected by the HIV virus. This can be done by strengthening measures aimed at prevent-

ing infection of those already affected, their family members and communities.

Dr Piot was speaking during the opening of a symposium on "Children living in a world with Aids" held in Geneva, Switzerland, recently.

It was organised by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the international body of experts who monitor states' compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

According to the statement, UNAids estimates that over 500,000 infants were infected with the killer virus last year through mother-to-child transmission before, during birth or through breast-feeding.

According to Dr Piot, in many countries children's vulnerability to HIV infection is also increased because they are denied sexual health education and services or those in place are "not friendly" or designed to meet childrens' specific needs.

"Restricting access to sexual health education aimed at postponing first sexual intercourse and practising safer sex are violations of children's rights."

A review of strategies against the Aids/HIV epidemic has led to community-based organisations in Nyanza Province come into the scene. Health managers now appreciate the need to build on and tap their potential, adds Church-

hill Otieno.

One facet of the multi-thronged new effort against the scourge is to first build the capacity of community-based organisations (CBOs), and second tap their potential as entry points into the communities for other players in the Anti-Aids campaign.

Another strategy is to send out messages that help people change risk-prone behaviour. This will involve the church, leaders and the mass media.

Health authorities say CBOs undertake 60 per cent of the Aids/HIV activities in Nyanza and they cannot be ignored anymore.

A joint effort between the Ministry of Health and the British Department for International Development, the HIV/Aids Prevention and Care (HAPAC) project has set the empowerment of CBOs as the first priority in seeking to arrest the fast spread of the killer virus and managing those already infected.

An official of The Futures Group International, Mr Richard Odindo told *Horizon* that CBOs potential was hardly exploited in the anti-Aids campaign.

Given that 60 per cent of Aids activities were done by CBOs, Mr Odindo said they could do a lot though their potential was hindered by lack of resources, dependency on voluntarism and lack of well established management structures.

Under the HAPAC Project, the Futures Group International in collaboration with the Family Support Institute (FASI) and the Ministry of Health are involved in a month-long series of five workshops to build the capacities of CBOs in 12 districts in Nyanza.

FASI director, Prof Shanyisa Khasiani, said they will hold three-day training sessions in Migori, Homa Bay, Kisumu and Siaya to empower about 16 such organisations.

In this effort, CBOs will be empowered to prepare relevant project proposals, establish administrative and financial management capacity, supervise and monitor activity implementation, and prepare and disseminate financial and activity reports.

Among their apparent hindrances are:

But pundits argue that one round of capacity-building workshops alone cannot be enough to transform CBOs into able bodies overnight.

Town workers blamed for Aids spread

BY SIRIMA GITHINJI

The death of Paula Mungane in 1996 sent shivers and panic in her family and especially to her younger sister Violet.

Married in 1989, Paula and her husband Peter had a lot of dreams. They dreamt of buying a piece of land in the vast and mountainous Taveta District, putting up a house, giving their only daughter the best education they could afford, among other aspirations. Like a glass falling on a concrete floor, so were their dreams shattered by HIV-Aids.

Paula and her daughter died still dreaming and her husband is now sickly with the Aids-causing virus.

Affected most by Paula's death was her sister Violet who became aware that the virus causing Aids was real and spreading like bush fire in her village. Violet blamed her suspicious and superstitious community for taking HIV-Aids lightly, claiming it was a curse.

Violet, 27, who works as a petrol station attendant at the

only petrol station in Taveta, is a Christian and she is actively involved in outreach ministries. She calls upon her community to adopt righteous living through the power of God's Holy Spirit.

She attends seminars that are conducted in her area to create awareness about the Aids causing virus. "The death of two of my close relatives is enough and I want to help people understand what Aids is, and remove the myth surrounding it," Violet says with much determination in her voice.

MAP conducted a two-day workshop for pastors and church leaders in Taveta to train the church leaders on ways of reducing HIV-Aids infections and teaching them on how to take care of those already infected and affected.

"When it comes to Aids, most of the Wavetas (local residents of Taveta District) are now laying the blame of those working in big towns for bringing the virus to Taveta," Sera Alex Mwatabu, 27, said.

"I know it is a bad disease and we need to be very careful and guard ourselves," Sera adds.

Sera, who attended the MAP seminar, said that what Taveta residents need most is accurate and value-based information about HIV/Aids: "The myth surrounding the disease must be removed from peoples' minds," says Sera, a mother of seven-year-old-boy.

Sera, married to an education officer, says that MAP has given them a challenge. "It is upto us now to guard ourselves against this terrible disease," she adds.

A teacher at Abiola Primary School, Sera vows to organise seminars and preach against HIV/Aids. The seminar held at the Chala Safari Hotel brought together more than 30 church leaders and pastors from all denominations in Taveta.

Taveta, unlike other towns in Kenya, has had relatively low rates of HIV/Aids infections in the past. Now, the story is changing for the worse. A dis-

tance of about 450 kilometres from Nairobi and with a population of approximately 17,000 people, this sleepy border town between Kenya and Tanzania, is now waking up to the reality of Aids.

"There are many people infected here today," Felista Wafula Okaya, an Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK) Regional Aids Co-ordinator in-charge of Taveta, Wundanyi and Tana River Districts says.

Felista also attributes the rising number of the infected to those working in Kenya's big towns, and along the Mombasa highway and coastal towns.

Felista, who abandoned her career as a nursing sister with the Government to join the war against Aids, said that the 'only' solution to the Aids menace is God: "People must fear and revere God." Her work involves training pastors and encouraging them to start programmes to assist those orphaned and affected by Aids.

A mother of two children, Fe-

lista is also a pioneer founder member of Christian Response to Aids Challenges (CRACH) group.

Founded in 1996, CRACH teaches people about HIV/Aids through skits, plays and songs. Felista, 29, travels to her home base in Voi to Taveta, Wundanyi and Tana River covering between 60 and 80 of the Anglican Church of Kenya Parishes with the Aids message.

"In whatever I do, I involve God who gives me the strength and knowledge to speak against the Aids menace," she adds.

A MPA's Workshop facilitator, Wilfred Amalemba, urged the pastors to uphold the sacred trust that people have in them and not to expose the secrets shared with them by those who need their guidance and encouragement.

"Do not share with anybody what you have been told in secret. It is very important that people learn to confide with you," Amalemba, who together with a colleague from MAP Be-

atrice Mweru, told a group of church leaders in Voi.

Pastor Boniface Ijuma of Church on the Rock, Voi, said that people should be tested before they are married in church. "This should be enforced (sic) in the laws of the land," Pastor Ijuma suggests. He went on to say that innocent people find themselves infected through marriage: "This is unfair to the innocent partner," he added.

Beatrice, MAP's Aids Co-ordinator, Coast region, urged the leaders to discourage "Come-We-Stay" type of marriage

(This is a 'marriage' without a church or a government certificate). People adopted this repugnant behaviour to test their compatibility and if they were not compatible they separated.

"Pastors must discourage this type of habit as it enhanced the spread of HIV/Aids," she said. Beatrice lamented that the church is being used to join couples who have been living together for the sake of a church wedding.