**December 1, 2013**

**Don’t listen to purists please, our teenagers need condoms**

**By ODONGO**

Billions of US dollars spent teaching abstinence have been proved a failure. In counties like Homa Bay, 90 per cent of the youth have had sex before 18.

We cannot stop teenage sex, but we can stop teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections

Earlier this month we learnt that young Kenyans are using post-exposure prophylactics (PEP) to mitigate the risks of unprotected sex.

PEP is a sort of super-morning-after pill that reduces chances of contracting HIV.

After weekends aided by the elixir of the grape and the grain, many wake up in a post coital haze and rush to the nearest clinic to stock up on what was meant to be a rape drug.

Abortion is also frequently used as a contraceptive by under-18s, according to the Ministry of Health.

Over 50 per cent of youngsters have sex before the age of 15 in some counties.

Often, the sex is unprotected. Isn’t it funny, then, that after one lobby — Family Health Options Kenya — proposed the perfectly logical idea of handing out condoms to teenagers, the squealing began?

It is high noon in the moral panic arena. Muslim and Christian leaders have come together to condemn this outbreak of rationality at responding to a global pandemic.

Heavens forbid that we should give our youth condoms that may save their lives!

Bishop Joseph Maisha — with a name like that, no need to ask which side of the debate he lies — of Inter-Religious Peace Foundation of Kenya suggested that handing out condoms will exacerbate the situation and “promote sex”.

Quote he: “We will obtain reverse gains because contraceptives would promote sex instead of controlling it and escalate the already wanting situation.”

**WHAT IS WRONG WITH PROMOTING SEX?**  
What is wrong with promoting sex, as long as it is safe sex? In fact, how do you promote sex? It already seems pretty popular, judging by the world’s present population.

The problem here for the clergy isn’t the alleviation of suffering, but a concern that teenagers are having sex. Moral prurience triumphs over harm reduction.

If the truly religious wanted to help stop human suffering, they would adopt usage of contraceptives.  
Pregnancy is the least of your worries when you are having unprotected sex.

But for teenagers the worries are multiplied because pregnancy could be potentially disastrous to education.

Also, pregnancy for under-16s puts the body under too much physical stress and could lead to numerous complications.

Silence will not work. Billions of US dollars spent teaching abstinence have been proved a failure.

In counties like Homa Bay, 90 per cent of the youth have had sex before 18.

We cannot stop teenage sex, but we can stop teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. It’s prophylactics they need, not moralistic preachment binges.

We should ask why we are not proudly promoting the sexual health of our teenagers, be they in primary or secondary school. I am not advocating for teenage sex. No.

I am asking that they be given both the knowledge and tools to prevent themselves from contracting disease or getting pregnant.

Sex education should be mandatory regardless of parental or religious views, and condoms should be available in upper primary.

The idea that teaching sexual education and providing condoms will lead to an increase in teenage sex is ludicrous.

Children are not blank slates who are immeasurably impressionable and infinitely imitative that any lesson in class will immediately lead them to carrying out what they are taught.

Do children in primary school go out and build wind vanes and wind socks after learning about them in Science class? Do they go out and become amateur cartographers scribbling maps of their surroundings after learning about maps in Social Studies?

Few do, most do not. So why would you claim that teaching children about sex will lead to an increase in sex among children in any meaningful quantity?

Why should we believe that children would be more seduced by being taught about safe sex than, say, how to act ethically as taught in Social Studies? If truly the child was a blank slate that we could mould as we see fit, then all we would do to get rid of crime is bombard them with positive messages of goodness and crime would simply vanish.

**CHILDREN ARE NOT INFINITELY IMPRESSIONABLE**

Except that, after eight years of training, we still have crime; meaning that children are not infinitely impressionable. A child seeing a murder in a drama on television will not immediately go out and murder someone.

This illogical opposition to sex reeks of Manichaeism, the idea that we are somehow something more than matter, and that sex, far from being a physical act, has spiritual underpinnings.

Thankfully, that should not be a secular government’s concern. Our primary concern is the health effects of risky sexual behaviour, not any unproven spiritual fallout from teenagers having sex.

Arguing that condoms will make the situation worse is like saying that having fire extinguishers in a building will lead to more fires. As drivers are taught how to drive, they are also told to wear seat belts.

All cars come fitted with seat belts, not to encourage bad driving, but to provide protection on the off chance that something goes wrong.

You are taught how to wear a seat belt long before you get to drive. Similarly, you should be taught how to use prophylactics before you ever need them.

There is a risk that children engage in sex before ever learning to use a condom. And that, truly, is worrying.

Sex education is still a national taboo that we must explore.

It is embarrassing to have to explain the birds and the bees to children, but I find it easier to deal with that than a venereal disease. The choice is both simple and stark, information and tools that may save lives, or disease and abortion clinics.

Is he right? Should teenagers have access to condoms?

...**Standard gauge railway line will help us retain competitive edge**

The greatest advancement to global trade was when the United States decided to pick the 20-foot container as its preferred mode of moving goods.

But this only helps in quickly packing and unpacking stuff from ships. You still need attendant infrastructure to get things moving, so a port is only as useful as the infrastructure leading up to it.

Tanzania’s Bagamoyo port will be able to handle about 34 times the cargo volume of the Mombasa port. If China is our friend, Tanzania must be its best friend.

With the Mombasa port geographically constrained, our only hope to compete is to develop a very fast method to move cargo.

In the ensuing race to supply Eastern Africa, we need to have a very fast way to move imports from the port to the interior.

The standard gauge railway line, whose construction was launched by President Uhuru Kenyatta last week, will attempt to do this.

It will move 216 containers per trip and do the Nairobi-Mombasa run in a quarter the time it takes now. This newfound speed of our railway could help counter Tanzania’s vast scale.

The seamless ability to move goods between Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda is required to check the sheer size of Bagamoyo.

It is conceivable that at some point moving goods from Tanzania to Rwanda will be cheaper than using the Kenyan route.

Also, if there is a premium on time, it could become the adopted route, which is why our standard gauge rail is important.

Moving cargo fast enough will also enable us to save on demurrage charges, which are paid to ship owners for delays in cargo — and therefore delays on the ship.

Our inability to store and move oil and cargo fast enough is costing us millions of dollars annually already. If we have reliable and fast railway transport we will no longer need to detain ships with cargo as we make space.