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Abstinence-Only Sex Education: Failing Teens?

ABSTINENCE ONLY SEX EDUCATION

You are listening to ReachMD XM157, the channel for medical professionals. Welcome to Advances in Women's Health, sponsored in part by Eli Lilly. Your host is Dr. Lauren Streicher, Assistant Clinical Professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Northwestern University Medical School, The Feinberg School of Medicine.

Everything you always wanted to know about abstinence only sex education. You are listening to ReachMD XM 157, the channel for medical professionals. Welcome to Advances in Women's Health. I am Dr. Lauren Streicher, your host and with me today is Ms. Lori Chaiten, the Director of the Reproductive Rights Project for the Roger Baldwin Foundation of the ACLU of Illinois and a member of the Board of Directors of the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent House. Ms. Chaiten has been involved in numerous court challenges to laws that impede women's access to reproductive health care and has played a leading role in numerous public advocacy projects including the Illinois Campaign for Reproductive Justice.

DR. LAUREN STREICHER:

Welcome Ms. Chaiten.

MS. LORI CHAITEN:

Thank you! I am glad to be here.

DR. LAUREN STREICHER:

Can you start by describing what abstinence only education is, what is included and more to the point what it does not include.

MS. LORI CHAITEN:

Under Federal Law an Abstinence Education Program must have its exclusive purpose teaching abstinence, meaning, there cannot be any discussion of faith and healthy sexual practices. These programs are required to teach that the expected standard is that sex will occur only in the context of heterosexual marriage, that sexual contact outside of marriage has harmful psychological and physical effects and that bearing children outside of marriage is harmful to the parent and the child. So the programs must discourage the use of contraceptive, they are only allowed to discuss contraception to highlight failure rates in preventing both pregnancy and STIs. These

programs are the only kinds of sex education program that the Federal Government funds and that Federal Government has funded these programs to the tune of 1.5 billion federal dollars over the last 25 years with most of that being spent in the past 10 years.

DR. LAUREN STREICHER:

So it has been around for 25 years, I was wondering how long these programs have been in existence.

MS. LORI CHAITEN:

It has been around for 25 years though the funding has increased dramatically during the Bush administration and we are at a point now where the government is spending about \$200 million a year, a little less than \$200 million in federal funds plus some required state matching fund.

DR. LAUREN STREICHER:

You talk about discouraging sex education. Could you actually define what they mean by sex, is it just intercourse or it will go beyond intercourse.

MS. LORI CHAITEN:

These programs are only permitted to teach about abstaining from all sexual conduct and even some of them even go so far as to guide young people to avoid kissing because kissing can lead to other things.

DR. LAUREN STREICHER:

Ok so that really does expand our definition of sex as most people think of it. So what if anything is taught about contraception, in terms of types of contraception, effectiveness, can the teachers who are leading these programs answer student's questions about contraception.

MS. LORI CHAITEN:

The only thing that these programs can do is they are receiving this federal money is to talk about contraception in terms of its failure rate and research show of course the people who participated in abstinence only programs are less likely to use contraception including condoms because they have not learned about and this is only thing they have learned is about failure rates. So, these programs really jeopardize the health of sexually active teens and they leave those who become sexually active later on prepared.

DR. LAUREN STREICHER:

Given that if they are not learning about contraception clearly they are going to be some pregnancies that results of all of this. So, what if the curriculum includes about pregnancy abortion there is a talk about specific information about the choices that someone might have

to make the risks of carrying a pregnancy determined risk of an abortion. Does it go there at all?

MS. LORI CHAITEN:

Actually, to the contrary the curricular required to teach a childbearing out of wedlock is harmful to the child and the parent, but that prohibits from discussing abortion and from discussing contraception again except to emphasize failure rates. There was a 2004 congressional report that concluded that many of these federally funded abstinence only until marriage circular misrepresent the effectiveness of condoms in preventing sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy by exaggerating their failure rates and while two of the federal abstinence only programs the AFLA and the CBAY programs do contain language about requiring medical accuracy. This language was long ignored by the government and only recently has the Department of Health and Human Services even asked programs to certify that they be accurate.

DR. LAUREN STREICHER:

Little of the information that is taught is not based on scientific facts, it is not medically accurate, isn't there some legislation that would require accuracy of information.

MS. LORI CHAITEN:

Again, the only ones of these of these stature to me is regulations that provide for the funding of federal abstinence only program that include the requirement of medical accuracy are these two programs I just mentioned.

DR. LAUREN STREICHER:

Ya.

MS. LORI CHAITEN:

And in those cases, the Federal Government is not imposing that. There have been bills to oppose both in congress and in state legislatures that would require that sex education be taught in a medically accurate age appropriate fashion and we here at the ACLU have been pushing an effort to get legislation like that pass in Illinois, so that every public school in Illinois would be required to teach comprehensive medically accurate and age appropriate sex education. Thus far, neither in the federal level nor the state level have those bills passed.

DR. LAUREN STREICHER:

My next question about how widespread are these programs. Is this an every public school in only some communities, the schools or the parents get any kind of say as to whether they participate in this program?

MS. LORI CHAITEN:

Abstinence only to marriage programs are increasingly replacing other forms of sex education in the schools and the reason of course is because of this vast amount of federal funding that has been made available to support them and as I said before there is no federal funding that supports programs that emphasize both the importance of waiting to have sex well also providing accurate age appropriate and complete information about how to use contraception.

DR. LAUREN STREICHER:

So if the school wants to get funding they have to utilize these programs.

MS. LORI CHAITEN:

If they want to get federal funding these are the programs they have to utilize them once in school accept this money it is required to teach sexuality education in accordance with the requirements set by the federal government that I discussed earlier. There has actually been some research that shows that between 1995 and 2002 there was a significant decline in the rates of adolescence who received formal instruction about methods of birth control and at this point only one-third of adolescence have received any instruction regarding contraception and what is interesting about that is that the research also shows that the vast majority of US parents, teachers, and the leading medical group believe that teen should receive complete and accurate information about the delaying sexual activity and contraception. Those groups include the American Medical Association, The American Academy of Pediatrics, ACOG, The Society For Adolescent Medicine, they all advocate for comprehensive sexuality education because that is the best way to help our youth make healthy choices when it comes to sexual conduct.

DR. LAUREN STREICHER:

And you know it seems like some youth are going to be a greater risk than others. Particularly, if these are in school districts that are dependent upon this funding it stands to reason that it is going to be in the poor school districts, so they really cannot turn it down and if that is the case do you find that there are some groups that are at higher risks than others?

MS. LORI CHAITEN:

Definitely, in communities where the school districts do not have the privilege of having the tax dollars they need to create their own curricula to have the freedom to create their own curricula. So the reason again that these programs are increasing is because the money is there. This is what the Bush Administration has used as the carrot to get school districts to teach only abstinence.

DR. LAUREN STREICHER:

And of course these are very expensive programs and I would like to talk about the impact of these very expensive programs. Now, according to the <____> institute reports 47% of United States High School youth report having had sexual intercourse and by age 19, 70% of teens are sexually active. Now, you mentioned this before that the Bush Administration actually funded a study to see how well these programs are working. Can you talk little bit further about this congressionally mandated report and what it found regarding the impact of the sexual activity in these teens.

MS. LORI CHAITEN:

The first of these reports actually came out in 2004. Congress issued report that found widespread distortion of information and misrepresentations as well as dangerous gender stereotype being in the federally funded programs. This report showed that more than 80% of these programs contain false and misleading information. They misrepresent the effectiveness of condoms in preventing sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy and they contain false information about the risks of abortion. They also <_____> vision in science and they promote gender stereotype. So then in 2007 and rigorous multiyear scientific evaluation authorized by congress presented clear evidence that the programs just do not work. This is referred to commonly as the Mathematica study conducted by Mathematica and the study looked at 2000 students and found that Abstinence Only Programs participants were just as likely to have sex before marriage as teens who did not participate in these programs and program participants were shown to have first intercourse at the same mean age and had the same number of the sexual partners as teens who did not participate. Of course that the difference is that these teens had less information to assist them in making healthy decision when they did become sexually active.

DR. LAUREN STREICHER:

Now, we have some clear evidence from these congressionally mandated reports that federally funded abstinence only marriage programs are not effective in stopping or even significantly delaying teen sex. So as a result of that has there been any decrease in these federally funded abstinence programs and what they do with this information.

MS. LORI CHAITEN:

They have essentially ignored it. There has been no reduction in the federal funding. Congress has continued to support these programs to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars a year. An additional research has come out further demonstrating that these programs are ineffective in the goal of preventing sexual conduct.

DR. LAUREN STREICHER:

And how to they justify that.

MS. LORI CHAITEN:

That is quite unclear. It do not think that they actually <_____> justify, they simply keep funding it.

DR. LAUREN STREICHER:

I would like to thank my guest Ms. Lori Chaiten, who has given us accurate information and insight into the impact of Abstinence Only Education.

I am Dr. Lauren Streicher, you are listening to ReachMD XM157, the channel for medical professionals. For a complete program guide and podcast visit www.reachmd.com. For comments or questions call us toll free at 888MDXM157.

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