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A role for TV in sexual health

RECENTLY, both the Fox and CBS television networks announced that they would not air a Trojan condom ad that focuses on responsible condom use. This refusal to acknowledge realistic prevention methods is a prime example of the cultural contradictions in this country concerning sexual health. In 2005, 70 percent of all television shows and 77 percent of prime-time shows contained sexual content. Fox and CBS shows were no exception. From "Temptation Island" and the "Victoria's Secret Fashion Show" to commercials about Viagra, both major networks have taken sex all the way to the bank.

Yet these same networks apparently feel that they have no obligation to promote responsible decision making and common-sense public health solutions, including the use of condoms to prevent unintended pregnancy. Fox refused to air the ad, which portrays a pig turning into a man once he buys a condom, on the grounds that "contraceptive advertising must stress health-related uses rather than the prevention of pregnancy."

Preventing unintended pregnancy is a major public health issue. In the United States, approximately half of all pregnancies are unintended, and half of these end in abortion. Teen pregnancy is a public health epidemic in this country. This year, more than 750,000 teens will become pregnant and

nearly 4 million will contract a sexually transmitted infection. According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, fewer than one-third of teenagers who give birth before the age of 18 will ever obtain a high school diploma.

Compare these unhealthy statistics to the teen pregnancy rates in Europe. The US rate is more than nine times higher than that of the Netherlands, and nearly five times higher than in Germany. In contrast to the Bush administration's irresponsible focus on abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, European adolescents are brought up with consistent, comprehensive sexuality education and are exposed to public awareness campaigns in the media that focus on responsibility and safety, including condom use. In these countries, media are partners in prevention, not part of the problem.

It's time to change the conversation about sexual health in this country. Sexual health is a vital part of every person's overall well-being. We need to foster public understanding that sexual health is just as important as dental health, and that responsible prevention measures like condom use during sexual activity should be as routine as brushing teeth.

We need families to engage in open conversations about values and decision making around sex. We need school curriculums to include comprehensive sex education, with information about both abstinence and prevention methods, in order to delay teenage sexual activity and curb teen pregnancy and infection rates for sexually transmitted diseases.

The end of the Trojan ad says, "Evolve. Use a condom every time." There clearly needs to be some evolution on the part of television executives at these two networks, and a revolution in terms of how we as a society think about, talk about, and address sexual health. Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts is committed to leading that revolution because we know that sexual health matters.

Dianne Luby is the president/CEO of Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts.

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