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U. S. / European Differences in Condom Use

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The recent editorial in the Journal on complacency about teen use of condoms addresses an important issue for adolescent sexual and reproductive health [1]. Dr. Freya Sonenstein identifies the recent worrisome trends among teens in the United States, including little recent improvement in sexual and condom behaviors and an increase in teen birth rates in 2006. She suggests we have become too complacent in our expectations of teenagers. I would agree.

I would offer one small correction regarding U.S./European differences in condom use. We recently published a comparison between 15-year-old students in the U.S., using averaged data from the 2001 and 2003 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) [2], and data from same-age students in the 2001/2002 Health Behaviors of School Children survey [HBSC] [3]. We found that condom use among students in the U.S. was somewhat lower compared with other developed (primarily European) nations. Condom use in the YRBS was 66% for female and 75% for male participants compared with the HBSC overall at 74%. Moreover, hormonal contraception was lower (11% for female and 6% for male participants in the YRBS, and 24% overall in the HBSC). In consequence, dual use was much lower among U.S. students (4% and 3% in YRBS vs. 16% in the HBSC).

More recent data show a similar pattern. Among 15-year-olds, condom use at last sex in the HBSC was 72% for female and 81% for male respondents [4]. Averaging data from the 2005 and 2007 YRBS, we found that condom use among U.S. students was 62% for female and 75% for male respondents. Pill use remains much higher in Europe.

Lower condom and contraceptive use in the U.S. compared with Europe is an important part of the explanation for higher teen birth and pregnancy rates in the U.S.

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