

Overview

Swiss TPH Spring Symposium: Sex, Youth and Health

April 16, 2010, WWZ Auditorium, Basel, Switzerland

Today, a huge proportion - more than 1.75 billion - of the world's population is between the ages of 10 and 24 years. Youth can be an exciting period of life as they make their way towards adulthood. Most young people are full of optimism and represent a positive force in society, and when supported, they can be resilient in absorbing setbacks and overcoming problems. Thus, young people can play a positive force in the development of their communities and societies¹. However, adolescents are exposed to risks and pressures on a scale that their parents may not have faced including poverty, new health challenges such as the HIV and unsafe environments. Globalization has accelerated change while the structures that protected previous generations of young people are being eroded. As a result, they are increasingly asked to make and take decisions which have lifelong consequences for healthy development.

Sexual and reproductive life choices are often the most challenging. Adolescents are at risk of early and unwanted pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV and AIDS.

- Early pregnancy among the nearly 16 million women age 15-19, for example, account for 11% of all births worldwide with 95% of these occurring in low and middle income countries. Such births are higher risk for young adolescents, making complications of pregnancy and childbirth the leading cause of death of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 years².
- Unwanted pregnancies amongst adolescents lead to high rates of unsafe abortion among young women, especially in Africa where "girls aged 15-19 years account for one in every four unsafe abortions."³
- There are about 5.4 million youth living with HIV; about 59% of them are female. In 2007 about 40% of new infections among people aged 15 and over were in youth (15-24 years).
- Sub-Saharan Africa is home to 61% of all youth living with HIV (3.28 million), 76% of them female. Southeast Asia and the Pacific have the second highest prevalence with an estimated 1.27 million youth living with HIV, 70% of whom are male. In Central and Eastern Europe, the Russian federation and Ukraine have the fastest growing epidemics in the world, and young people account for a large proportion of the number of people living with HIV⁴.

Helping young people to make better choices is our common challenge. With the declaration issued from the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) stating that "...countries, with the support of the international community, should protect and promote the rights of adolescents to reproductive health education, information and care, and greatly reduce the number of adolescent pregnancies"⁵, an increased attention has been given to meeting the sexual and reproductive health care needs of young people. Despite this increased attention, strategies have diversified with little consensus on best practices across cultures, contexts and continents.

Programmatic approaches have ranged widely. School and community based efforts to deliver life skills education with or without sexual and reproductive health education information are common. Promotion of abstinence, condoms, being faithful, monogamy, delayed sexual debut and alternatives to penetrative sex have all been explored. Engaging families, communities, peers through government, faith-based and or non-governmental organization supported programmes are widespread. And more recently, these approaches are evaluated and tested to ensure the approach achieves expected outcomes.

Reaching youth, despite the vast array of approaches, remains challenging. Increasingly practitioners are turning to alternative approaches to bring sexual and reproductive health information to youth where they are, through mediums they can relate to. Innovative, technology driven approaches for example, can reach young people in public and cyber spaces. In the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute's Symposia we will explore the status of young people's sexual and reproductive health in various contexts and look into past and present approaches to reaching young people with services and information to improve their chances for a healthy, productive future.

¹ http://www.who.int/child_adolescent_health/topics/prevention_care/adolescent/en/index.html

² WHO. Why is giving special attention to adolescents important for achieving the millennium development goal 5 ? WHO. Geneva. 2008.

³ WHO. Women and health. Today's evidence, tomorrow's agenda. WHO.2009.

⁴ UNAIDS and WHO. Aids epidemic update 2007.

⁵ United Nations (1994) Report of the International Conference on Population and development, Cairo 5-13 September 1994.