



Is safe sex message falling on deaf ears?

Kate Ellis



I APOLOGISE up-front for the fact it is unlikely I will make it through this column without quoting those musical gems of the late '80s and early '90s, Salt-N-Pepa. I apologise also that, at the risk of freaking out parents, we need to admit one very simple fact up-front – teenagers and young adults do have sex.

And at the risk of grossing out teenagers and young adults, another fact needs to be acknowledged – your parents, like many older people, have sex too. It's true. Perhaps confronting to contemplate, but true. Get over it.

Australia has come a long way over the past 20-plus years in terms of our general awareness of sexual health issues and sex education. Yet despite being more open than ever to discussing sexual health issues in our homes and other places like schools, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are making a comeback in Australia.

There are dangers out there for both young people as well as older, more mature adults in their late 30s and 40s, and it is a matter that needs to be taken seriously.

The emergence of HIV/AIDS as an international public health threat in the early-to-mid 1980s was a major turning point for Australia in our approach to sexual health issues.

Back then, to contract HIV or AIDS was akin to a death sentence. There was a real urgency in Australia's response to the serious threat of HIV/AIDS and it helped to inform our response to other STIs.

I was about 10 years old when the Grim Reaper ads first appeared on television screens and scared a generation of Australians into confronting HIV/AIDS and the broader issue of sexual health and education.

The ads, featuring a menacing grim reaper literally bowling down men,

women and children without fear or favour, were confronting and groundbreaking. AIDS doesn't discriminate and serious action is needed to stop the spread of the disease. These were the central messages of that health campaign.

Just as shocking at (and for) the time were images from a different television ad that featured dozens of heterosexual couples lying in bed. It posed the question: Do you really know the sexual health and history of the person you are sleeping with?

Looking down the barrel of a major public health crisis, Australia faced up to the challenge posed by HIV/AIDS and worked in partnership with health professionals, support groups and HIV-positive people to stop the spread of the disease.

Australia's response to the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s was overwhelmingly successful, and we are still cited today by bodies such as the World Health Organisation as an example to other countries.

Yet 20 years on, it seems like some of the lessons learnt about sexual health are being forgotten. HIV infection rates have been growing slowly but steadily each year in Australia since the late 1990s. There have also been steady increases in infection rates for other sexually transmitted infections, including gonorrhoea, syphilis and chlamydia.

According to *Australia's Health 2008* there was a 31 per cent increase in the number of new HIV diagnoses in Australia from 2000 to 2006. The number of people diagnosed with gonorrhoea in Australia has grown from 6433 in 2002 to 8550 in 2006. In the same period, the total number of chlamydia infections has almost doubled from 24,437 to 47,030.

While Australia is far from the

HIV/AIDS crisis of the mid-1980s, the recent rise in infection rates across a variety of disease groups is of considerable concern. We need to realise where the risks are and why the old messages about the dangers of STIs and the still incurable diseases like HIV and AIDS aren't cutting through like they used to. And we must examine why there have been increases in infection rates in a number of infections over a number of years.

Is it a question of complacency? Or do we need to reinvigorate our messages about safe sex and re-educate both young and middle-aged Australians all over again?

Could another factor be that when people today think of safe sex they think only about contraception and not about protection from STIs?

Whether we are talking condoms or Gardasil, the vaccination for women that protects against the Human Papilloma Virus and cervical cancer, people should not mistake these as signs that doctors or governments are encouraging young people to go out and have unsafe sex.

Diseases like HIV/AIDS have not gone away and there is still no cure.

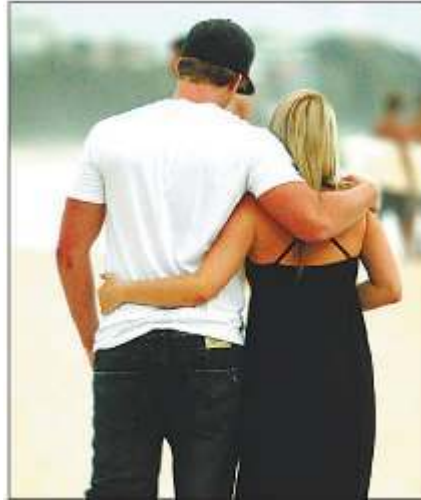
There is a need to start talking seriously about sexual health issues in Australia – particularly between parents and their children, as well as between partners.

We may wish to block out that uncomfortable truth that our children and/or our parents are sexually active and remain in denial but we cannot become complacent in our approach to sexual health. So, as that delightful tune of 1991 implored, *Let's Talk About Sex, Baby*. And let's make sure the message gets through.

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