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EDUCATING TEENAGERS ON AIDS

Dr Colin Griffiths

Two years ago in the UK, the role of Health Education was still considered to have very little value in dealing with AIDS. There was an enormous level of anxiety amongst both professionals and public alike. In Wales in particular there was an obvious lack of any organised educational strategies for any of the concerned groups. Before commencing such a programme initially at a local level, I addressed myself to three questions:-

- 1) Why do we need a Health Education Programme
- 2) In which way do we disseminate the information
- 3) To what target groups do we need to get this information

The answers might seem obvious now, but as I have said at this time education was not accepted as a viable proposition for dealing with AIDS.

1) We need an Education Programme for two reasons:

- a) To raise awareness, and baseline knowledge about the disease in an attempt to allay the myths and anxieties that exist.
- b) Through provision of information to try and modify an individual's behaviour, in an attempt to limit the spread of HIV.

2) In which way do you disseminate the information

Direct contact is essential. Discussing AIDS, regardless of which group you are dealing with raises many issues and specific questions, the answers to which always need to be qualified.

As far as AIDS is concerned, it is no use answering 'you can't' or 'you mustn't' - people always ask 'why?'. Therefore you must have someone there qualified to do this. No video, film or leaflet used in isolation can cover all the issues raised.

3) To which Target Groups do we need to get the information

Two years ago, the target groups were considered to be only most at risk in the gay groups and there was very little differentiation between the content of the programmes, i.e. a distinction between general education to raise awareness, and education for modification of behaviour.

It is essential to target the information given to the needs of individual groups and this is now slowly beginning to happen. The main criticism I have of the two recent government campaign is that they tried to convey too many different messages targetted to different groups but under the auspices of one General Campaign - uninteresting, didn't attract attention - with the result that much of the emphasis was lost.



Therefore, select one group and design the programme appropriate to the needs of that particular audience.

I will now outline a programme designed specifically for one group i.e. Teenagers. This was organised initially as a series of talks on AIDS to pupils at all the comprehensive schools in West Glamorgan. After much consultation with the local Director of Education it was agreed that the talks be given to the the 4, 5, and 6th forms. Another feature of the programme was to invite parents along for evening sessions to complement the programme that the pupils had in the day. The programme was designed to place AIDS in the context of other sexually transmitted diseases. Certain basic information was given to describe very briefly the uniqueness of the virus and to distinguish between the AIDS carrier and the AIDS sufferer. However, most emphasis for this group was placed on allaying many of the myths about transmission.

One can be explicit without being offensive and much emphasis was put on the fact that it is the practice which transmits the virus regardless of which particular group is involved. Detailed description of any particular sexual practices was felt unnecessary and was avoided. Whilst the risk of heterosexual spread is still considered by many to be low, it is important to point out that the numbers of cases of AIDS in Britain today reflects infection 3-5 years ago (because of the incubation period) and therefore it will be another 3-5 years before the true picture of AIDS today in Britain will be seen. Therefore, in the context of other STD's it was stressed that the greater the number of casual sexual relationships one has the greater the chances of picking up on an STD and also the AIDS virus. The particular problems that injecting drug users pose was also discussed.

Following each talk, time was allowed for questions and the number and depth of the questions asked was very encouraging. There seems to be a high awareness about AIDS in this group and they appear to give much thought to the situations where they themselves could be at risk e.g. parties, etc. On the whole the feedback from both pupils and parents was very positive. Once the facts about the disease had been given they felt much 'happier' and less 'worried'. They had previously still thought AIDS to be solely a problem for gay groups and had now been able to look at AIDS as a problem which has the potential to affect everybody. Many parents also suggested that this programme be given to a much younger group, but that is for the Directors of Education and schools themselves to decide for the future.