

25 Red Lion Square

London WC1R 4RL

TEL: 020 7404 3126

FAX: 0870 762 8971

EMAIL: enquiries@secularism.org.uk

WEB: www.secularism.org.uk

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

EVIDENCE SUBMITTED FOR CIRCULATION TO MEMBERS OF THE
HOUSE OF LORDS AD HOC COMMITTEE ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL
ORGANISATIONS

ON HOW EFFECTIVELY THE GLOBAL SPREAD OF COMMUNICABLE DISEASES IS
BEING CONTROLLED THROUGH ACTION BY INTERGOVERNMENTAL
ORGANISATIONS

22 MAY 2008

AIDS: Who is opposing condom use?

This reports shows that opposition to condoms as a tool to fight the spread of HIV/AIDS is motivated primarily by conservative religious ideas, often backed up and justified – and indeed disguised – with pseudo-science.

The election of George W Bush set the tone and signalled the fresh opportunity many on the religious right were waiting for to interfere in HIV/AIDS prevention policy and to replace science with pseudo-science and facts with faith. ON the campaign trail in 1999, the president-to-be had told them what they wanted to hear.

"My Administration will elevate abstinence education from an afterthought to an urgent goal," Bush told a crowd in New Hampshire in November 1999. In a speech in Indianapolis, Bush promised, "In every instance where my Administration sees a responsibility to help people, we will look first to faith-based organizations, charities and community groups."

<http://www.whrnet.org/fundamentalisms/docs/issue-gluttons-0706.html>

Pressure from the religious right, the US government has ring-fenced one third of the country's contribution to international AIDS prevention to so called "abstinence programmes", even though "such programmes alone are insufficient," according to a report in the New York Times in 2004.

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9902E0DD153FF93BA25756C0A9629C8B63>

The Global Battle Against AIDS; Opposition to Condoms

New York Times
Published: May 18, 2004

The Bush administration's enlightenment on AIDS treatment has not, alas, been matched in AIDS prevention programs. Spurred by the religious right, the administration and Congress have fenced off one-third of the nation's international AIDS prevention funds to be used for abstinence programs starting in 2006, even though such programs alone are insufficient.

The administration is using pseudoscience to justify its decisions. Randall Tobias, its AIDS coordinator, has said numerous times that condoms are not effective at preventing the spread of AIDS in the general population. He repeated this assertion while testifying in the House of Representatives in March, citing the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Mr. Tobias is wrong. The dean of the London School wrote to him to say that the school had never produced any such report, and that its research shows that condoms do work.

Mr. Tobias and others in the administration often cite Uganda as a place where AIDS transmission was reduced by teaching youth to be abstinent. But Ugandans -- and more neutral researchers -- say that condom use plays a big role. In Zambia and Brazil, condom use has also reduced AIDS transmission, but administration officials do not talk about these countries. They have removed information about condom use and references to the value of sex education and condom promotion from the Web sites of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Agency for International Development. Their benighted policies put millions at risk.

Furthermore, agencies fighting the epidemic are now hamstrung by counter-productive conditions of US funding:

In addition to short-changing international relief efforts, Bush is using AIDS funds to place religion over science, promoting abstinence and monogamy over more effective measures such as condoms and sex education. Before overseas groups can receive U.S. funding, for example, the Bush administration requires them to take a "loyalty oath" to condemn prostitution -- a provision that AIDS workers say further stigmatizes a population in need of HIV education and treatment.

http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/story/7371950/an_epidemic_failure/

The Bush administration's stance is backed by the Catholic Church. The United Nations AIDS organizations UNAIDS has stated emphatically that such a stance has had devastation consequences globally: "The rapid spread in Latin America of the virus that causes AIDS is made worse by the Roman Catholic Church's stand against using condoms."

According to a report by Reuters News Agency last year:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/healthNews/idUSN2222015720071023>

Catholic condom ban helping AIDS spread in Latam: U.N.

Reuters
Tue Oct 23, 2007

TEGUCIGALPA (Reuters) - The rapid spread in Latin America of the virus that causes AIDS is made worse by the Roman Catholic Church's stand against using condoms, a U.N. official said on Monday.

Some 1.7 million people across Latin America are infected with the HIV virus or full-blown AIDS, and the epidemic is spreading swiftly with up to 410,000 new cases in 2006, up from as many as 320,000 new cases in 2004, according the UN AIDS program, UNAIDS.

"In Latin America the use of condoms has been demonized, but if they were used in every relation I guarantee the epidemic would be resolved in the region," said Alberto Stella, the UNAIDS Coordinator for Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

The Catholic Church, which holds sway in Latin America despite the rise in evangelical churches, opposes all forms of contraception and instead promotes abstinence as a way to avoid spreading AIDS.

"The fact young people start to be sexually active between 15 and 19 without sex education contributes to the spreading of the virus, as well as the fact that the evidence shows abstinence is not working," Stella told Reuters.

Latin America is home to nearly half the world's 1.1 billion Catholics, but the Church's position on premarital sex and contraception often clashes with modern values. Brazil, the region's largest Catholic nation, regularly distributes free condoms to try and bring down HIV infection rates.

UNAIDS is emphatic that – apart from abstinence (which is obviously impractical – “Quality-assured male and female condoms are the only products currently available to protect

against STIs, including HIV. When used properly every time one has sex, condoms are a proven and effective means of preventing HIV infection in women and men.”

<http://www.unaids.org/en/KnowledgeCentre/Resources/FastFacts/default.asp>

UNAIDS states that condoms have played “a decisive role” in combating AIDS and that acknowledges the condom as “the most efficient and available technology to reduce the sexual transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.”

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has noted that the Roman Catholic Church supports the pseudo-science peddled by the religious right:

“As in the United States, condom opponents within the Roman Catholic church have at times made false scientific claims about condoms in order to buttress their moral arguments.”

<http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/hivaids/condoms1204/3.htm>

HRW also testifies to the impact that the religious lobbies in the US have had on the practical side of prevention strategies in Africa.

“A year ago, ABC was still cool in Uganda. Now, C is out of the equation.”

—Anonymous, representative of a U.S.-funded HIV/AIDS organization, Kampala, November 2004

ABC refers to the compromised three-pronged approach to reducing HIV infection risk: Abstinence, Be faithful and Condoms. More and more pressure is being applied to drop the “C” altogether.

According to HRW, many of these organisations fear that if they promote condoms too loudly, they will risk being denied access by local governments.

<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2005/uganda0305/7.htm>

The also fear cuts to international funding sources, primarily from the United States. Headlines like in the Boston Globe “**Faith groups urge cuts to AIDS fund**” must have a profound impact on the confidence and security these groups need to do their important work.

http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2006/12/01/faith_groups_urge_cuts_to_aids_fund/

But UNAIDS flags up another chilling reality:

“Due to gender norms and inequalities, young girls and women are regularly and repeatedly denied information about, and access to, condoms, and often they do not have the power to negotiate the use of condoms.”

<http://www.unaids.org/en/PolicyAndPractice/Prevention/Condoms/default.asp>

This observation by UNAIDS researchers was emphasized in a speech by its director, Peter Piot in December 2006. My Piot stated that drivers” of the epidemic were “especially gender inequality, stigma and discrimination, deprivation and the failure to protect and realise human rights”.

<http://www.unaids.org/en/PolicyAndPractice/DriversOfTheEpidemic/default.asp>

In the most at-risk societies, it is undeniable that these “gender norms and inequalities” are enforced and perpetuated by conservative religious leaders.

The Vatican has been joined by Islamic leaders in condemning condom use. For example, in Kenya, a Muslim leader stated:

“A lot of money is being wasted to poison our community ... a huge amount of money is spent on buying condoms, buying immorality.”

<http://wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd%5B157%5D=x-157-561599>

In Malaysia, for example:

Muslim clerics have strongly criticized the plan, worth \$40 million, saying that it would encourage drug abuse and extramarital sex and that it violated Islamic law.

<http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/07/03/news/malay.php>

Some Islamic countries – in particular – criminalise those infected with HIV.

<http://hrw.org/english/docs/2008/04/07/egypt18438.htm>

The tragic irony is that the same conservative religious forces that undermine efforts to educate at-risk groups about condoms are the same that perpetuate the human rights deficiencies that UNAIDS identifies as a prime driver in the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The combination of religious influence on western governments, the religious nature of many charities working in Africa and South America, and conservative local traditions propped up by religious authorities is a potent cocktail mitigating against successful efforts to control the spread of the disease.

The situation is best summed up by Don Baxter, Executive Director of the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO):

“Political interventions by a range of governments, particularly by the US and by members of the Organisation of Islamic Countries – sometimes all in unholy alliance with the Holy See – lead to compromises and confusing language which will undermine the necessary focus on the populations where most HIV infections are occurring.”

http://www.afao.org.au/view_articles.asp?pxa=ve&pxs=86&id=539

Further reading:

Catholic Church's Opposition To Condom Use Contributes To Spread Of HIV In Latin America, UNAIDS Official Says

<http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/86571.php>

Muslim opposition to condoms limits distribution in the north

<http://www.iolhivaid.co.za/index.php?fSectionId=1597&fArticleId=4038826>

AIDS Conference Sees Flaws in Bush's ABCs

http://www.sptimes.ru/index.php?action_id=2&story_id=986

Experts Tout Condoms in AIDS Fight

<http://www.aegis.com/news/ap/2004/AP040753.html>

Written Testimony to the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform on the Human Rights Concerns of Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs

http://hrw.org/pub/2008/women/CRR_HRW_Abstinence_Only_Testimony0408.pdf

Morocco: Civil 'War' Over Condoms

<http://www.aegis.com/news/ips/2006/IP060111.html>

See also:

Dr Kent Hill (of US Agency for International Development) justifies “ABC” on the religious-right propaganda TV programme “700 Club”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wuZDwheFQQ>

[on Bush and Texas - KPW]

<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/factsheet/fsbush.htm>

<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/factsheet/fsbush.pdf>