

The Military Age Group

HIV/AIDS and Peer Educators in Mexico

Susan Pick and Dean Hall

Adolescents as a population are extremely vulnerable to HIV transmission, due to the fact that they are just beginning to explore their sexuality. To further demonstrate this point, it is important to note that in Mexico, AIDS is the fifth leading cause of death for men between the ages of 24-34, indicating that many were infected most probably between the ages of 15-24 (Secretary of Public Health, 1995). Additionally, a study carried out by the Population Reference Bureau found that 55 percent of the female adolescents interviewed had had premarital sex. A representative home study conducted in Mexico City with female adolescents showed that 77 percent of the girls ages 18-19 were sexually active (Pick de Weiss, et. al. 1988). The same study found that only 38.1 percent of adolescents used some type of contraceptive method during their first intercourse. Another study in 1988 showed that while 73 percent of university students surveyed said that AIDS was the most serious sexually transmitted disease, only 9.1 percent of those that were sexually active always used a condom (Secretary of Public Health, 1989).

Societal values and family structure have affected how people experience relationships and sexual activity over the past decades. Conservative norms have permeated the majority of Latin America, creating the impression that activities and attitudes related to sexuality coincide with the norms. However, Mexican national opinion polls have shown that the majority of the population maintains liberal views in regard to sexuality and sex and family life education (Pick, 1994). This information has helped foster socie-

tal support for sex education and other programs and policies related to sexuality.

Effective sex education, including specific information on safe sex behavior, is necessary to prevent HIV/AIDS from spreading into the adolescent population. With this in mind the Mexican Institute for Family and Population Research (IMIFAP) designed an educational program to train adolescent peer educators to deliver the message of HIV prevention in their schools.

Seventy-seven peer educators were trained in the IMIFAP sex and family life education program (*Planeando tu Vida* (Planning your Life), which contains topics such as pregnancy, contraceptives, the biology of human reproduction, values, self-esteem and verbal and non-verbal communication. In addition the peer educators were trained specifically in HIV/AIDS prevention strategies. Each of the peer educators have and continue to implement the programs in their schools. Evaluations carried out by IMIFAP staff have shown that the programs presented by the peer educators have had a statistically significant influence on the student's attitudes surrounding issues of sexuality, as well as an increase in knowledge of HIV disease, its transmission and prevention. The success of this program has enabled us to implement it in other parts of Mexico.

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Australia

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Responses to the decision

The Defence Minister, Senator Robert Ray, reacted with hostility to the Commission's decision. On the day the decision was released, he said that an appeal would be lodged. "I totally disagree with the decision and if I get the support of my colleagues I'll legislate (to enshrine the blanket ban against HIV positive soldiers)", said the Minister. He went on to say it was proper for the defence force to maintain the highest health standards. He said overweight, under-height, Hepatitis B and C positive people and a range of others were banned from the defence force, and so should HIV positive people.

Chief defence spokesman Brigadier Adrian D'Hage said "this is a very strong issue for the defence force... The defence force is the insurance policy for the country, and unlike the police or the ambulance service or the fire brigade, we are unable to call up an ambulance with people who will deal with spilled blood with gloves and other necessary equipment. It is not possible for anyone in the defence force in the front line to worry about rubber gloves", he said.

"We've got to be confident we're HIV free. OK, it's only as good as the last test, but it's still a good morale boost."

The President of the Australian Federation of AIDS Organizations, Bill O'Loughlin, welcomed the Commission's decision. "This is an important victory for people with HIV and for all people with disabilities," he said. "The Defence Force, like other employers, has to comply with the law. People with HIV are quite capable of serving their country, and should not be prevented from doing so." Mr O'Loughlin said it was offensive to talk about the presence of people with HIV in the workplace as bad for morale.

Bill O'Loughlin pointed out this was the first HIV case to go all the way to a full hearing under the *Disability Discrimination Act*. "It sends a bad message to people with HIV for the government to immediately talk about changing the law, after the first hearing. All other employers have to comply with it, and government should now accept that military employment is also covered. We are happy to work with the government in drawing up a new and workable HIV policy for the defence force." □