

Printed in **The Times**, 18 June 2007
**Teenagers need better
information on sex**

Sir, The Independent Advisory Group on Sexual Health and HIV is right to highlight the problem of alcohol, drugs and underage sex in our celebrity-driven culture (Drink and drugs fuel rise in teenage sex disease, 15 June at www.timeonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/health/article1934909.ece).

Teenagers need more information to give them the ability to place sexual activity in a moral context. Issues of self-esteem and assertiveness need to be addressed so that they develop the strength of character to decline sex if they do not feel ready.

However, the Government's simplistic approach to sexual health, as evinced by its recent Condom Essential Wear campaign that may be paraphrased as "use a condom or you'll catch something nasty", will simply not do.

This approach increases the stigma surrounding sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and the trauma of patients when they are diagnosed.

Most of us are going to catch something at some time. For example, a study in Sweden found evidence of a prior HPV (wart) infection in 90 per cent of women there. Our young people need the medical knowledge to place different STIs in context.

As a charity we are devoted to helping people to put their lives back together after a genital herpes diagnosis. Medically, this is actually a pretty unimportant condition for most of us — up to 75 per cent do not even know they have it.

Unfortunately the unwarranted stigma merely compounds the problem.

We desperately need a more grown-up approach and less hysteria about STIs.

NIGEL SCOTT,

Herpes Viruses Association, London N7

Lead letter in **The Independent**, 26 July 2007
**Use of herpes stigma to
encourage condoms
abuses our rights**

Sir: We all want to see more people being responsible about sex, using condoms and having check-ups (report, 21 July at <http://news.independent.co.uk/health/article2788633.ece>). But reinforcing stigma and laying a guilt trip on people with genital herpes is not the way to do it. It simply makes the people who are already diagnosed even more miserable.

The Health Protection Agency's annual report on the nation's sexual health shows an increase in the diagnosis of many sexually transmitted infections, including genital herpes. Professor Pat Troop, the HPA chief executive, said: "It is important to remember that herpes infections are carried for life." Dr Gwenda Hughes, also of the HPA, said: "Genital herpes is a lifelong infection; it's not curable." Lisa Power, of the Terrence Higgins Trust, added: "This is a lifelong and unpleasant condition which will require ongoing treatment, and not something to be taken lightly."

Herpes simplex has two names, "genital herpes" when it is on the genitals and a "cold sore" when it is on the mouth. Two-thirds of us carry one of the viruses that causes it. It usually goes undiagnosed because most people who have it either get very mild symptoms or no symptoms. Chickenpox and glandular fever are also herpes viruses carried by most of us. They are also lifelong infections; chickenpox can recur as shingles and can be very unpleasant, but no one is made to feel guilty about this.

The main problem for patients with genital herpes is stigma and psychological trauma. "Will I ever have another relationship?" "Will anyone want me again?" The Herpes Viruses Association is the charity that helps these patients put their lives back together. Reinforcing herpes stigma as a cheap way of encouraging condom use abuses the human rights of millions of us. It has to stop.

NIGEL SCOTT,

Herpes Viruses Association, London N7