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Epidemic

How Teen Sex is Killing our Kids

By Dr. Meg Meeker

Review by Johannes L. Jacobse

Fifteen year old Laurie was rushed to the emergency room with acute pain in her lower abdomen. Doctors initially suspected appendicitis, but surgery revealed something worse. Laurie suffered from pelvic inflammatory disease, which was caused by either chlamydia or gonorrhea. The infection began in her cervix, then climbed through the uterus into her fallopian tubes and then out to the ovaries. An abscess that formed on her right ovary had ruptured, spilling the infection into her abdominal cavity. Quick action by the surgeons saved Laurie's life, but she will probably never bear children.

Laurie's story is one of many that are found in the pages of Meg Meeker's [*Epidemic: How Teen Sex is Killing Our Kids*](#) (Lifeline Press 2002, 251 pgs.). A pediatrician who has treated teens for over two decades, Meeker sounds the alarm about the epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in the teenager population.

An epidemic is defined as a disease that attacks many people simultaneously. During an epidemic the incidence of the disease grows, and the disease attacks areas where it would otherwise not be found - such as the bodies of young children. The STD epidemic is even more dangerous because it involves more than one disease. The CDC categorizes the crisis as a "multiple epidemic" since it involves at least 25 different STDs - nearly 50 if you count the variant strains of the same disease.

One illustration shows how many teens are affected. Imagine a high school football stadium filled with teenagers. Then start counting. One in five of the cheering kids have herpes. Herpes has no cure. Every third girl has the human papilloma virus (HPV). HPV causes 99.7% of cervical cancer cases that kills over 5000 women each year. One out of ten has chlamydia. Even if we pulled out the healthy kids, the stadium would remain nearly full.

Consider these statistics:

- * Almost half of all students in grades nine through twelve have had sex.
- * Half of all girls are likely to be infected with an STD during their first sexual experience.
- * Nearly one in four sexually active teens have an STD.
- * Teens will contract nearly one in four of the 15 million new cases of STDs this year.
- * Teens make up 10% of the population, but they contract up to 25% of all STDs.

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- * Herpes (specifically herpes simplex type 2 or "genital herpes") has skyrocketed 500% among white teenagers in the last 20 years.
- * One in five children above age twelve tests positive for herpes type 2.
- * One in ten teenage girls has Chlamydia; half of all new Chlamydia cases each year are diagnosed in girls 15 to 19 years old.

It gets worse. The Journal of the American Medical Association reported in a February 2002 editorial that the number of people with asymptomatic STDs (diseases with no outward symptoms like lesions or warts) probably exceeds those whose diseases are diagnosed. This means that the epidemic may be twice as large as we think.

The STD epidemic is a catastrophe. Millions of teens have been hurt. Millions more are threatened. Diseases are tearing into the bodies of our children in ways that will cause irreparable harm or possibly death.

The crisis exists because society has jettisoned the moral standards that direct sexual behavior. The shift began with the "sexual revolution" in the Sixties when the effects of unbridled promiscuity were largely unknown. (Only two known STDs existed thirty years ago, and both were treatable with penicillin.) As society adopted the values of the Sixties, the moral culture changed. Promiscuity ruled the day, and STDs spread like wildfire. Big media is a big culprit because it targets teens with the message that sex has no risks. They have sexualized almost every corner of the youth culture. They relentlessly sell promiscuity, but make no mention of the harm that the promiscuity causes. They care for your child's wallet, but not for his welfare. Greed drives their moral recklessness.

There are things that parents can do. Several years ago the [Search Institute](#), a Minneapolis-based think tank that studies the moral lives of children, isolated three factors in the lives of teens who successfully navigated the minefield of teen culture. The teens who developed sound morality and avoided non-marital sex and other enticements of the teen culture had three things working for them: 1) a relationship with a stable adult (parents); 2) friends who shared the same moral values; and 3) a religious grounding. Parents must cultivate this kind of environment.

Be alert to misrepresentations of the risks associated with sexual activity such as the "safe sex" campaign. Safe sex is a myth. Condoms can reduce the incidence of fluid borne STDs, but have no effect on diseases spread by skin-to-skin contact such as herpes. Even the reduction of fluid borne diseases is much less than most people think. Gonorrhea for example, is spread 50% of the time even when a condom is correctly used. Birth control pills can prevent pregnancy, but they are powerless against every kind of STD.

Note too that most organizations that promote safe sex are those that market promiscuity or profit from its consequences. Moral responsibility is not part the MTV, Abercrombie and Fitch, Cosmo Girl or Planned Parenthood corporate culture, for example. Safe sex campaigns give an appearance of moral respectability, but they avoid real moral accountability.

Meeker writes that her two-decade practice with teens has taught her that most teens have a deep-seated desire to protect their virginity. Religious clergy who work with teens report the same thing, and it is the reason many teens experience deep anguish after their first sexual encounter. They sense that something important has been lost. This desire for

sexual purity needs to be cultivated and affirmed.
Teens are desperate for moral guidance. Those who know right from wrong must provide the moral clarity that our teens both crave and need.

Johannes L. Jacobse is a Greek Orthodox priest and edits the website www.orthodoxytoday.org.

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