

Premature removal of condoms by young men in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire: an example of an AIDS prevention dilemma

I would like to raise one of several 'problematic' issues on condom use in Africa and elsewhere. Ethnographic data on urban youth in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire [1] show that young Africans are not reluctant to use condoms. This is contrary to certain ideas or opinions on sociocultural obstacles to condom use. Some young Africans use nicknames or quote vernacular terms for condoms, such as 'fougoula nafama' ('life-saving hat', in Bambara), or 'tiéré boré' ('foreskin', in Dogon). In a semiquantitative survey performed in Abidjan in December 1991, young people aged 15 to 25 years, of both sexes, reported using condoms on average on one in two occasions of sexual intercourse in the 3-month period preceding interview [2].

Such encouraging data must be weighed against the unusual condom-use practices recorded at the same time, which could seriously hinder AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases (STD) prevention efforts. One is the removal of condoms during intercourse, i.e., the man withdraws from the vagina, takes off the condom, then resumes intercourse until he reaches climax and ejaculates freely.

In this study, 14 cases of condom removal were reported among the 251 young people interviewed (146 condom users). When asked the reasons for this unexpected removal, those concerned or their partners mentioned the following: the lack of sexual pleasure despite physical exertion and prolonged coitus, the frustration of insemination and reproductive power, the inhibition of climax, the psychological discomfort of the man toward a regular partner, the embarrassment of the woman during intercourse with condom. In one case there was a context of acute alcoholism. On some occasions an impulsive urge appeared to be stronger than the perceived risk of infection; one man knew his partner was HIV-infected but nevertheless removed the condom.

'Premature' condom removal is not specific to Africans. In an HIV screening centre in Paris, a white French man reported a similar practice. Human sexuality is diverse and continually changing, and influenced by culture, technology, science and unpredictable factors such as the AIDS epidemic. As an aspect of sexuality, condoms are subject to a wide variety of attitudes, practices and frequencies of use [3].

However, sexual pleasure and circulation of sperm are not necessarily compatible with biomedical objectives of prevention or contraception, nor with rules concerning the utilization of a manufactured object like the condom. Premature condom removal, an unreported but presumably not uncommon practice, should be taken into consideration in condom studies and investigated further with regard to condom-promotion programmes and AIDS/STD prevention strategies.

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