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Sex by the book



Facts of life: Bundoora Secondary College teacher Dan Carroll shows students how to use a condom.

Photo: *Craig Sillitoe*

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Despite unplanned pregnancies and rising rates of sexually transmitted infections, sex ed in schools remains ad hoc, write Renee Switzer and Miki Perkins.

IN A classroom at Bundoora Secondary College in Melbourne's northern suburbs, all eyes are fixed on a 16-year-old student as he rolls a condom onto a fleshy, pink, life-sized dildo.

Minutes earlier, the dildo had been nestled inside a hollow plastic banana, standard issue for sex-ed classes like this one.

The bananas these days might be plastic, but the message remains the same — how, as one student helpfully shouts out, "to stop the lady getting pregnant!"

Teacher Dan Carroll, 26, is guiding his class through the thorny topics of contraception, relationships and sexuality, with a strong focus on harm minimisation. "It really does surprise me each time I teach this stuff how much the kids don't know," he says. "They know the names of STIs but have no idea of the symptoms."

His students seem relaxed as they chat about where to buy condoms — the local health centre kept a bowl at reception until someone ran off with it — and the prevalence of HIV in Australia.

Bundoora has a strong reputation among sexual health experts for its program, based on government resource *Talking Sexual Health*.

But these students are the lucky ones. Experts say sex education is failing our young people. Adolescents are having sex at a younger age, more often and with more partners. More than half are sexually active by the age of 16. At the same time, sex-ed classes are ad hoc and not compulsory, and parents are free to withdraw their children from them. Teacher training is also hit and miss, with classes taught by teachers with no expertise in the area.

And amid all this are some alarming statistics on the sexual and reproductive health of young Victorians. For example, figures from the Victorian Perinatal Data Collection Unit show more teenagers gave birth in 2006 than in the previous three years. And for every teenage birth, data also suggests another teenage pregnancy is terminated.

Professor Julie Quinlivan, Notre Dame University's dean of medicine and Australian expert on teenage pregnancy, says that while teens becoming mums is not necessarily undesirable — some do so deliberately and manage motherhood very well — about half of teenage pregnancies are unplanned. The majority of those end in termination.

Just as alarming is the dramatic increase in sexually transmitted diseases in Victoria, particularly chlamydia. Last year, there were 10,018 reported cases of chlamydia — which, if left untreated, can lead to infertility — 1063 more than the previous year. Already this year there have been close to 7000 cases reported, more than at the same time last year.

Other sexually transmitted infections such as HIV and syphilis are also on the rise. "It's a very worrying epidemic of chlamydia and that comes down to a lack of knowledge on the way sexually transmitted diseases are transmitted," Quinlivan says.

Which in turn comes back to what young people learn — not just about the mechanics of sex, but about relationships more broadly.

But according to Susan Sawyer, director of the Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Adolescent Health, such are the sensitivities about sex ed that schools are anxious about teaching anything other than the biology of the subject.

"The sadness and paradox from my perspective is that in an age when young people are most exposed to a sexualised society and are most at risk in terms of unplanned pregnancy and STIs ... we are still stuck feeling uncomfortable about sexuality education in schools," Sawyer says.

And it seems students agree. In a study of 20 adolescent girls, the majority of whom were pregnant, by Melbourne University medical student Kim Xia last year, the teens described their experience of sex education as a "joke".

Project supervisor Professor Roger Short says Australia has "extremely poor sex education in schools and extremely high teenage pregnancy rates" compared to other countries.

"The better thing would be to have fewer teenage pregnancies and fewer abortions and that can only be achieved by increasing the amount of information these kids are given in school," he says.

Certainly, students at Bundoora Secondary College appreciate their classes.

Sixteen-year-old Dion Ellul finds the classes useful, and says they are the main source of information for most of his friends: "I can talk to my older brothers about things but some parents aren't open to it, they get embarrassed." Fifteen-year-old Sarah Pinkerton chimes in: "Because they're older, they might not know a lot about it anyway. It makes sense because we've got a young teacher."

THERE is no mandatory, comprehensive sex-education policy in Australian schools. Unlike core subjects such as maths and English, parents can withdraw their child from the subject.

In state schools, sex ed is taught under the umbrella of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards. VELs sets out a broad curriculum but individual schools are left to decide the specifics of how they teach the subject.

"So you have one school doing a fantastic, comprehensive sex-education program for its kids while the school down the road is doing nothing, or covering a couple of things in science and having a health day," adolescent health expert Professor Anne Mitchell says. "They might cover all the topics that are in the VELs but they don't do them with any level of detail. It's a national problem — sexual health is very ad hoc."

All of this at a time when, according to Melbourne University researcher Anastasia Powell, we are living in what has been described as an "age of raunch" and highly sexualised culture.

She interviewed more than 100 Victorians aged under 25 about the sex education they had received. Most spoke of its limitations. "It's that same old thing — too little, too late," Powell says. "They told me it was a chance draw, depending on what school they went to."

Her research shows that while most teens are acquainted with the mechanics of sex, they yearn to learn more about its social and emotional aspects.

"Pressure to have sex, and forced sex, is a big issue of concern for young people, and the fact we're not putting resources into that is frightening," she says.

Quinlivan agrees. The former head of the Royal Women's Hospital "young mums" clinic says most teen mums understand the biology of sex.

She believes it's important that sex education is taught in context with relationship building, trust, caring and respect.

There are many reasons why teenagers get pregnant — for some, it is unplanned and for the majority of those the pregnancy will be terminated. But for others, the pregnancy is what Quinlivan refers to as "semi-planned".

"They know about contraception but aren't using it," she explains. "With this group, before pregnancy there's often a default from school, low self-esteem, lack of an obvious career path."

There are also those teenagers who are in stable relationships who choose to have a baby.

In 2002, a national survey of 2000 Australian year 10 and 12 students found that 38 per cent had

multiple sexual partners. One in 10 sexually active young people did not use any contraception in their last sexual encounter.

The survey, which is the only one of its kind, has since had its federal funding withdrawn, a situation its author, Marian Pitts, from La Trobe University, describes as a "disaster".

Without this kind of information, she says, teenage sexual culture might be changing, but adults will remain in the dark.

Parents Victoria executive officer Gail McHardy recalls that at a meeting last year with Democrats Senator Lyn Allison, students from both private and government schools aired their concerns about sex education.

"The students said they knew their teachers weren't comfortable delivering (sex education), they were embarrassed. They felt it would be far more constructive and effective if health professionals came in and did that form of education."

The senior students were also worried about the casualisation of sexual activity and sexually transmitted diseases. "They talked about young people feeling pressured. Their concern was young people are performing oral sex and all this sort of stuff and having no idea what risks are involved," she says.

Meanwhile, pressure is building at a federal level to tackle the problem. Liberal MP Mal Washer and Victorian Liberal Judith Troeth, along with Allison, are part of a cross-party parliamentary group looking at the issue. All say it's time to act.

"Whatever view you take, our children our entitled to have an education and make their own decisions about what they want to do with their life: it should be an informed decision," says Washer, who is also a medical doctor.

Allison believes mandatory minimum guidelines should be put in place at every school to shore up a system she describes as "totally inadequate".

"There are plenty of schools that get no sex ed, there are some that get great sex ed and some with mediocre, reluctant teachers who pay lip service to a state-wide curriculum," she says.

The parliamentary group is awaiting a draft national sexual health and reproductive strategy that is being drawn up by the Public Health Association of Australia and Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia. It will be completed in 2008. "If we get the consensus from people out there in the real world working in these areas ... we will approach the ministers," Washer says.

AT UNIVERSITY High School in inner-city Parkville, a group of year 8 students is jostling for position in a role-playing game. Each student takes on a persona: a 16-year-old mother, a straight girl with a steady boyfriend, a young gay footballer.

Hysterical giggles break out when a bespectacled boy cheerfully says: "I'm a 19-year-old lesbian — on amphetamines."

This is sex education at its most progressive. Under the watchful eye of teacher Catherine Clopsteins, these students are chewing over masculine and feminine stereotypes.

Most in this group are aware of the many permutations of modern sexuality. Bisexuality, they say, means you get more dates. Gay footballer? Your family and team will come around eventually. Yet even here there are gaps in their knowledge. One girl admits she doesn't know what HIV-positive means. Another asks: "If you've got AIDS, will your baby get it, too?"

In contrast to the Bundoora students, they say classes like this are not their main source of knowledge about sex — that's where sealed sections of magazines such as *Dolly*, the internet and gossiping with friends come into it — but are good to "fill in the gaps" and ask questions.

Sex ed can also be difficult for teachers, many of whom get little training. Deakin University's Lyn Harrison says teachers are influenced by their own personal prejudices and embarrassment.

"They feel comfortable talking about the 'plumbing' side of things but that taught in isolation is not much use to students; they can't connect the dots," she says.

Family Planning Victoria's Sharon Davey says when teachers are shown how to deal with the difficult questions, many of them become "downright enthusiastic" about the topic.

"We support the idea of a minimum mandatory curriculum and teachers being trained, but schools have to actually take it seriously with the amount of time they give it," she says.

The Department of Education says it is up to individual school communities to determine what sex-education programs are best for their students, and that it provides comprehensive information, guidelines and resources to help them, as well as professional development for teachers.

Independent schools are left to devise their own curriculums, although most use the VELS standards as a guide.

Association of Independent Schools chief executive Michelle Green says the group provides schools with materials from the Department of Education as well as other resources, which schools can choose to use. Like government schools, sex ed is not mandatory.

A Catholic booklet called *Directives in Christian Education in Sexuality* was produced by the Archdiocese of Melbourne in 2002 to provide guidance for Catholic schools. It warns against promoting irresponsible or "recreational" attitudes to sex, the use of experts whose ideas are not in accordance with Catholic beliefs and, most controversially, the teaching of safe sex, including the use of condoms and other contraceptives.

The Catholic Education Office's Maria Kirkwood says schools place a strong emphasis on the role of parents as the primary educator.

Meanwhile, private Muslim schools in Victoria and interstate who are members of the Australian Council for Islamic Education in Schools have adopted a sex-ed policy aimed at overturning the influence of Western sexual values on students.

Non-Muslim teachers are banned from teaching sex-ed classes and students are taught that premarital sex and homosexuality are anti-Islamic, and therefore prohibited. Discussion of condoms is banned in case it encourages promiscuity.

Fears that sex education encourages sexual activity are emotional arguments and not based in fact, Harrison says.

The research indicates that first sexual intercourse is delayed with good sex education, and when young people do engage in sex they're more likely to use protection.

Teenagers who don't get exposed to good sex ed are more likely to enter bad relationships, have higher rates of STIs, and encounter sexual harassment and violence, she says. "You can't guarantee that if they have good sexuality education they're going to turn around and have safe sex, but it's more likely."

In the Netherlands, age-appropriate sex education classes are taught from prep to year 12.

Melbourne University's Roger Short says while Australians are obsessed with the "sin of sex", the Dutch speak about the "joy of sex" and are open about the subject. Condoms are handed out by teachers and the oral contraceptive pill is available through school health workers.

Given that Dutch teens have their first sexual experience later, and teenage pregnancy rates are lower, health experts argue Australia should review our system.

By comparison, in the United States, abstinence-only programs were found to make no difference to the likelihood that teens would have sex.

Parents don't give their teenage kids enough credit, say the students at Uni High.

"Mum will say she wants to talk to me about something and I'll be like, 'Mum, I *know*'," one 15-year-old says, rolling her eyes.

"These classes are important," says one young man, awkwardly, "even though sometimes this stuff can be, well ... embarrassing."

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