

An Italian survey on how information campaigns about AIDS have changed contraception in young couples

A sectional study and a comparison with the literature

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Summary: The purpose of the present investigation was to ascertain whether adolescent had been sensitized by the campaign against AIDS and if their behaviour regarding the use of contraception had changed accordingly. To this end 2,000 questionnaires (of which 1,554 were returned) were distributed to a population aged 13-20 years, recruited from high schools or sporting centers.

The results of our survey, which started in 1992 and lasted 15 months, indicate that after the informative campaigns of 1986, contraceptive habits have changed, and at present, the method predominantly used by teenagers (60.6%) at their first sexual intercourse is the condom. The results of the present study have been compared with those of the literature regarding the years previous to our study. In our investigation, only 18.9% of the interviewed used oral contraception vs. 43.3% and 34.50% of those reported in 1980-85 and 1986-89, respectively. Particularly significant is the fact that 11.6% of teenagers used the condom in addition to oral contraception at their first sexual intercourse.

In conclusion, we can assert that AIDS campaigns conducted in Italy, starting from 1986, has resulted in an increase of the use of condoms with respect to other methods of contraception.

Key words: Contraceptive; Adolescence; AIDS.

INTRODUCTION

With the aim of limiting the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and in particular of HIV epidemics, starting from

1986 we have witnessed extensive public information on the transmission of the virus, which stressed the use of the condom as the only effective means of limiting the spread of the infection. With regard to teenagers, it can be said that the AIDS campaigns have contributed to revising view points on the prevention of the unwanted consequences of sexual behaviour. From literature it appears that before 1986 (^{1, 2, 3, 4}), contraception was primarily aimed at avoiding unwanted pregnancy and that oral contraceptives (OC), being practical and effective, represented the most frequently used method even by youths (^{4, 5, 6, 7}). When it was established

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that AIDS is a contagious disease and also sexually transmitted, the mass media campaigns for contraceptive information focussed on the prevention of the infection through the use of condoms as the only method of limiting the spread of the virus. It has been established that the condom is not very popular among youths. The aim of our work was to check whether AIDS campaigns have changed the contraceptive behaviour of adolescents and in particular at their first sexual intercourse.

METHODS

To be able to study the contraceptive behaviour of young couples we distributed a questionnaire (Tab. 1) to 2,000 young people aged 13-20 yrs. 1,554 of these completed and returned it.

Table 1. — *Epidemiologic investigations on contraceptive use by young couples.*

1. Sex	Age	Qualification
Profession	Status	
Social economic level		
Political ideological trend		
Weight	Smoking	
2. At what age did your sexual maturity start?		
3. At what age did you have your first menstruation?		
4. Were you prepared for this event?		
5. At what age did you have your first sexual intercourse?		
6. On that occasion did you consider the probability of becoming pregnant?		
7. On that occasion, what means of contraception did you use?		
8. Has the danger of becoming pregnant negatively influenced your sexual intercourse?		
9. Had you never hear of contraceptives?		
10. According to you, who has to take contraceptive measures in a couple?		
11. What method of contraception do you use at present?		
12. Who gave you first information about contraception?		
13. Did the increase in sexually transmitted diseases (AIDS) condition your contraceptive habits?		

Table 2. — *Cumulative data and percentages according to each answer.*

MAIN EPIDEMIOLOGY DATA COLLECTED			
Questionnaires distributed	2000		100%
Questionnaires answered	1554		77,7%
Sex distribution	females	1015	65.3%
	males	539	34.7%
Age distribution	13-15	153	9.8%
	15-18	1276	82.1%
	18-20	125	8.1%
At what age did your sexual maturity start?	8-11	54	3.4%
	12-14	1060	68.2%
	15-18	428	27.5%
	18-20	12	0.9%
How old were you at your first sexual intercourse?	8-11	15	1.0%
	12-14	572	36.8%
	15-18	754	48.5%
	18-2	213	13.7%
What type of contraceptive did you use at your first sexual intercourse?	See table 3		
Qualification	Elementary	0	0%
	Secondary	494	31.7%
	Superior	840	54.0%
	University	220	14.1%
Profession	Student	1215	78.1%
	Employed	168	10.8%
	Unemployed	171	11.0%
Political ideology	Conservative	434	27.9%
	Democratic	471	30.3%
	Labourist	320	20.5%
	Don't know	329	21.3%
Smoking habits	Yes	694	44.6%
	No	860	55.4%
At what age did you have your first menstruation?	8-11	39	3.8%
	12-14	871	85.8%
	15-18	102	10.1%
	18-20	3	0.3%
At your first intercourse, were you afraid of becoming pregnant?	Yes	765	75.3%
	No	250	24.7%
Did increase in the spread of AIDS change your contraceptive method?	Yes	1097	70.5%
	No	457	29.4%

Table 3. — *Type of contraception used by the study population (1993) and mean of selected reports from the literature for the case years.*

References	CONTRACEPTIVE METHOD USED AT FIRST SEXUAL INTERCOURSE				
	1975-79 (1-2-3)	1980-85 (4-5-6-7)	1986-89 (8-9-10)	1990-92 (11-12)	1993
Oral contraceptive (OC) . . .	23.8 %	43.3 %	34.5 %	23.5 %	18.9 %
Condom	32.1 %	20.9 %	37.9 %	58.2 %	60.6 %
No Contraceptive	32.4 %	22.8 %	18.7 %	11.2 %	11.6 %
Other *	5.5 %	3.0 %	4.9 %	1.6 %	1.4 %
OC + Condom	1.2 %	0.8 %	1.7 %	5.3 %	6.8 %
Unknown	5.0 %	2.0 %	2.3 %	0.2 %	0.7 %
Total	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %

* other methods include IUD, diaphragm and coitus interruptus.

ned. This questionnaire was anonymous, so the information provided remained confidential. The period of study, which started in 1992, lasted 15 months. The sample studied included 1,015 girls and 539 boys. The answers to the questions are reported in Table 2.

The data were elaborated and compared with analogous papers which had appeared in the Italian and the international literature and been carried out in countries with comparable traditions and customs towards contraception. We selected 12 significant papers and the mean of the percentages of individual studies calculated for different year periods.

RESULTS

Table 3 shows the contraceptive method used by the interviewed at their first sexual intercourse. The values from years 1975-92 have been calculated from data taken from case studies reported in literature, whilst those concerning 1993 refer to our study. It can be noted that in all the analysed OC and condom were by far the most predominant methods used. Under "other" headings we have included diaphragm, IUD, natural and behavioural methods. In our study, contrary to other international works, there was no statistically significant correlation between political ideology, profession qualification and the contraceptive employed.

In the population studied the age of the first sexual intercourse was between

15-18 yrs. in 76% of the cases and in 95% before 18 yrs. To the question whether the fear of AIDS may have changed contraceptive habits, 75% of the interviewed answered "yes". The percentage of affirmative answers did not differ from data reported in the literature.

DISCUSSION

Based on findings in Table 3, in the last 20 years the percentage of those using the condom as a method of contraception has increased. This prevalence grew significantly from 1986 to 1990. These results show how AIDS campaigns changed contraceptive habits among young couples. Our statement is supported by the analysis of other statistics reported in the Table. In fact the oral contraceptive, which up to 1980 represented the most frequently used device also by young couples, showed a significant reduction ranking in the second place among the most used contraceptive methods. A statistically significant increase in the use of the condom, together with oral contraception occurred in the years between 1986 and 1990; this is particularly important because it underlines how contraception is not used only as a means of avoiding pre-

gnancy but also as a prevention from infection by sexually transmitted diseases. The finding of 75% of the interviewed declaring a change in their contraceptive habits, due to the spreading of AIDS, has supported our study. The results of our study provide some optimism towards the hope of limiting the rapid spread of AIDS among populations not considered at risk. The use of the condom has provided us with a "weapon" for limiting the HIV epidemic and people seem to have perceived the message. Further information campaigns are recommended because at present they are the only suitable means stopping the spreading of the infection.

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