

Public health advocates push for safer sex in pornographic film industry

Sex sells, but can it educate? That's the crux of debate over a transformation within the pornographic film industry that public health advocates argue is required to promote safer sex in the general population through more extensive use of condoms.

The advocates, and even some pornographers, are urging mandatory condom use on industry sets to promote safer sex practices among consumers of adult films and within California's multibillion-dollar industry, which has come under increased scrutiny as a result of repeat outbreaks of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections among industry "models."

It's naive to think that adult films have no impact on the real-life sexual practices of viewers, many of whom have no other sexual experience or education at the time of their first exposure to porn, says Michael Weinstein, president of the AIDS Healthcare Foundation, the largest provider of HIV/AIDS care in the United States. "The average age at which a person first sees pornography online is 11 years old. We're very restricted in our ability to educate in schools and advertise about safe sex, so there's nothing to challenge the message that risky sex is normal sex. Unsafe sex in porn is one of the largest contributors to our current culture of unsafe sex, and we're exporting that culture of risk, too, because porn made in the US is distributed all over the world."

Unsafe sex in pornography sends the explicit message that condoms and other prophylactics are unnecessary barriers to pleasure, all the while putting performers at risk of disease transmission, says Chi Chi LaRue, a longtime California-based porn director and advocate for safer sex practices within the industry. LaRue refuses to film performers without condoms and left Vivid Entertainment, the world's largest adult film producer, when the company stopped using them.



Safe sex campaigns range from the humorous, such as the one above in which India's National AIDS Control Organisation used cricket terminology to promote condom use, to those based on learning by example, which some members of the California-based pornography industry have adopted in hopes of promoting condom use.

"I get messages on Facebook and Twitter all the time from fans who say I taught them about safe sex, or that I taught them to use condoms," LaRue explains. "It's not my job to police people — I'm a pornographer, not a parent — but being a pornographer, I have a platform to model safe sex."

It's a platform that some US-based and international pornographers are starting to take advantage of — paradoxically, at the same time the bulk of the industry is moving toward increasingly unsafe, hardcore acts.

Earlier this year, porn producer Tau Morena prominently featured condoms in South Africa's first all-black adult film in effort to promote their use and raise awareness about HIV/AIDS transmission. The DVD package of the sequel will feature educational "extras" about safe sex, including a video tutorial on correct condom use.

Although it maintains a "condoms-optional" policy like much of the straight

porn industry, Vivid Entertainment has also released several "how-to" DVD sex guides directed by sex educator and feminist pornographer Tristan Taormino. Each guide includes a safe sex featurette, demonstrating how to use condoms, dental dams (a square of latex used to prevent the spread of sexually-transmitted infections during oral sex), gloves and even saran wrap, among other prophylactics.

Those items also appear in other select scenes, but Taormino says many performers prefer not to use them. "The men say using condoms affects their performance. The women say using condoms means more wear and tear on their bodies. Many performers feel that, so long as everyone's been tested, they're protected. They also feel like they take other precautions; for example, the majority of HIV outbreaks in the industry have involved anal sex or double penetration with internal ejaculation, so people feel they can hedge

their bets by not doing those higher risk activities.”

While the gay porn industry has long relied on condoms to protect its performers from disease, producers of straight porn have an “almost homophobic” aversion to depicting safe sex and rely on the “false security” of voluntary 30-day testing among performers, says LaRue. “I know the people working for me are having unsafe sex on their own time. They could get a test Monday morning and by Monday night their status could change. If you don’t use a condom, it’s like holding someone’s gun to your head and pulling the trigger, trusting they haven’t put bullets in it since you last checked.”

In early December 2010, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health shut down the Adult Industry Medical Healthcare Foundation, a porn industry-funded clinic responsible for most performer testing, after actor Derrick Burts criticized the facility for failing to provide him with follow-up medical care when he tested positive for HIV earlier in the year.

“That clinic has long been the industry’s fig leaf,” says Weinstein. “They’re not there to protect performers; they’re there to deflect public scrutiny and responsible government regulation.”

According to the California Medical Association, between 2004 and 2008, nearly 2850 cases of sexually transmitted infections were diagnosed among some 2000 adult film performers in Los Angeles County alone. Approximately 70% of those infected were women, a quarter of whom suffered multiple infections (http://documents.lacmanet.org/lacma_2009_cma-hod_resolutions.pdf).

The association has joined the AIDS

Healthcare Foundation, California’s Division of Occupational Safety and Health, Los Angeles County Commission on HIV, Planned Parenthood Affiliates of California and the California Family Health Council, among others, in calling for state legislation to mandate safer sex practices within the industry.

Without regulation to level the playing field, the positive influence of adult films that do promote safe sex is “extremely limited” and often eroded by compromises made to stay commercially competitive, says Alex McKay, research coordinator for the Sexual Information and Education Council of Canada. “Sexually explicit materials that educate as they titillate sound fantastic, but most of the time, when you strip away all the bells and whistles and DVD extras and get down to the actual sex, you’ll find these films are no different from other porn.”

Part of the problem is that the majority of people who buy porn don’t want to see safe sex, and with the ready availability of online amateur porn where anything goes, mainstream producers feel pressure to constantly up the risk, says Paula Tavrow, director of the Bixby Program in Population and Reproductive Health at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Porn studio Treasure Island Media announced in November 2010 that it will extend the contract of an HIV-positive actor who specializes in unprotected or “bareback” sex with an HIV-negative partner. “One could liken it to the popularity of extreme sport,” says Tavrow. “The danger is part of the commercial appeal.”

In addition to industry resistance to

regulation, Tavrow says few state legislators are willing to take up the cause for fear of being labeled “the porn guy.” Earlier this month, however, Los Angeles City Council members voted unanimously to draft an ordinance that would require porn actors to use condoms on all shoots in the city.

But Taormino and other directors worry that health officials have “no clue about the realities of making a porn film.” Some of the suggestions made to Vivid Entertainment by health and safety consultants have been “crazy,” she says, such as mandating that “everything a performer wore to set had to be put in a red biohazard bag, washed and returned to them after the fact, or that every single sex toy had to be thrown out after single use. When you’re using top quality sex toys made of nonporous material, the majority can be easily disinfected or covered by a condom, and throwing them out would be an outrageous and stupid waste of money.”

Taormino feels conflicted about forcing performers to practice safe sex. “A safe working environment is as much about protection from coercion as it is about protection from disease.”

But if a performer feels uncomfortable using protection, they shouldn’t have sex for a living, LaRue says. “There’s absolutely no excuse you can give me not to use condoms, financial or otherwise. It’s completely possible to make and sell dirty, filthy, fabulous sex movies and protect everyone working in them. I’m the shining example of that. I’ve made some of the raunchiest, piggiest movies and they’ve all been safe sex.” — Lauren Vogel, *CMAJ*

CMAJ 2011. DOI:10.1503/cmaj.109.3770