2015

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarship.richmond.edu/forum/vol2015/iss1/5

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IN OUR WORLD

STDs on College Campuses: What Students Do, Don’t, and Don’t Want to Know

Sex: College students are having it, but too many of them aren’t staying safe.

BY CARNEY JUDGE

Chlamydia is the most common STD at the University of Richmond and the city of Richmond.
Molly Aaronson sat bewildered as she tried to answer basic questions regarding sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) on college campuses.

Aaronson, a Westhampton College sophomore from New Canaan, Connecticut, has never taken a sexual health class at the University of Richmond nor has she ever been tested for any kind of STDs. Out of the nine questions I asked Aaronson regarding STDs, she answered eight of them incorrectly, demonstrating her lack of knowledge that reflects the misunderstanding shared by many Richmond students about this grossly under-discussed topic.

Nearly 20 million new STDs are diagnosed each year in the United States, half of which are found in people aged 15-24, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). According to NursingSchools.net, approximately one in four college students has some type of STD.

Nationally, 80 percent of people who have a sexually transmitted disease have no noticeable symptoms according to NursingSchools.net. In a study by nursing students, more than half the participants believed they could tell if someone has an STD by looking at their physical appearance, and 60 percent of women said they would still have sex if the man refused to wear a condom.

According to the Huffington Post, approximately half of sexually-active young people will get an STD by the age of 25, and most young people with STDs do not even know they are infected.

When asked whether he thought the average Richmond student knew about the basic statistics regarding STDs, Steve Biese, the Vice President for Student Development, said, "No."

"I think students would know generally about the issue, but as far as particular names and data the average student would not," he said. Biese, who oversees many different departments including the Student Health Center, has had to deal with the growing STD concerns of the university, he said.

In the spring of 2013, the university conducted a campus-wide health assessment, said Slade Gormus, a nurse in the Student Health Center. The survey was the American College Health Association - National College Health Assessment, which collected responses from 633 students on campus through mass email requests. The study results revealed that 44 percent of males and 40 percent of females said they had sex in the past 30 days. Approximately 15 percent of males and nine percent of females also reported having four or more sexual partners within the last 12 months.

In the whole year of 2013, the student health center had 4,249 visits and only in 260 of those visits were students tested for various STDs. Of those tests, 33 came back positive, which is higher than the numbers in previous years.

Between 2009 and 2014 Richmond's student health center had positive results in tests for Chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, and HIV, Gormus said.

"Numbers of positives have increased over the years," Gormus said, "which makes sense because more people are getting tested, which is what we want people to understand."

In 2009, 122 students were tested for STDs and nine tested positive. In 2013, 260 students were tested and 33 were positive, Gormus said. "There are STDs out there and it's just what we are uncovering and identifying," she said.

Although HPV is the most common STD found on college campuses nationally, at Richmond the most common STD is Chlamydia, Richmond Health Educator Tracy Cassalia said. Chlamydia is also the most common STD in the city of Richmond, according to the CDC.

Chlamydia is a common STD caused by bacteria that both men and women can contract during oral, vaginal, or anal sex with an infected partner, according to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. Chlamydia usually does not cause symptoms, but if it does, one might notice a burning feeling when he or she urinates or abnormal discharge from his or her penis or vagina, according to the National Institutes of Health (NIH). In women, infection of the reproductive system through Chlamydia can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease, which can cause infertility or serious problems with pregnancy.

According to the NIH, a lab test can tell if someone has Chlamydia and antibiotics can cure the infection. Correct usage of latex condoms greatly reduces, but does not eliminate, the risk of catching or spreading Chlamydia. Experts recommend that sexually active women 25 and younger get a Chlamydia test every year.

Cassalia, who specializes in sexual health, said that sexual-health classes at Richmond look at the hookup culture on college campuses. This includes coverage of STDs, sexual responsibility, birth control, media and music impact on sex and sexuality, and topics of student interest. STDs and birth control are the
two topics students ask most frequently about, she said.

In any given semester 90-100 students are enrolled in sexual health, one of the available options for the required wellness classes at the university. However, there are other courses that cover sexual-health topics, such as Men's Health, Women's Health, and Relationships.

"Most students have a good understanding of the basic information but there are students who come here with no knowledge of sexual health," Cassalia said.

Being nonjudgmental and open to students' questions and concerns is one of the main priorities of the health educators, Cassalia said. "We try to meet the needs of everyone and give everyone the information so that it best suits them wherever they are in their life," she said. Whether a student decides to abstain from sexual behavior until marriage or explore their sexuality soon, the health educators want to supply students with the information they believe is necessary for every sexually active person to know.

"I feel like I definitely learned a lot," Westhampton sophomore Jill Dupree said when asked about her experience with her sexual-health class at Richmond. "The classes make you aware that diseases exist on campus and are not just a myth," she said. "Private high schools also are not required to have sexual health classes and I know this because many of my friends know little to nothing on STDs."

Cassalia also said that there are some societal issues regarding STDs that need to be addressed. "We as a society have a lack of discussion of these things. As a society we are not as open," she said in regards to sexual conversations between students and educators.

Cassalia also agreed that there is a stigma against STD testing. "You wouldn't judge someone for getting their cholesterol levels taken," Cassalia said. "It's scary for some people to go for the test just to find out the answer."

Pleasurefest is an event in the spring where the Student Health Center offers free testing for most STDs, which students would usually have to pay for at the health center. But, the event is held either in the Tyler Haynes Commons or the Forum, which may make many students feel self-conscious because people could see them getting tested and assume they have an STD, Gormus said.

"STDs, like alcohol, are part of college student health."

- JULIETTE LANDPHAIR
Westhampton College Dean

STD STATS

1 in 4
Approximate amount of new HIV infections that occur in youth ages 13-24

91%
Percentage of women with HPV who do not show symptoms

45%<
Amount of college freshmen who fail to consider contraception when intoxicated

In all frankness it has not been a topic of ongoing focus, which suggests it's not a crisis," Juliette Landphair, dean of Westhampton College, said when asked about STDs and their relevance on Richmond's campus. In staff meetings, Landphair even admitted that STDs are not huge topics of discussions, although the health center does mention them occasionally throughout the year.

"STDs, like alcohol, are part of college student health," Landphair said. And during freshmen orientation, the administration tries to incorporate sexual education into the information sessions that students are required to attend, she said.

"During orientation I remember briefly touching on the topic of STDs," Eric DeZaio, a Richmond College freshman, said when asked about his experience during orientation in August. "I think that students at Richmond have a good understanding about STDs and how to practice safe sex," he said, "but I guess they could always learn more."

DeZaio, who has never taken a sexual-health related course at Richmond, had no idea what the most common STD on Richmond's campus was and underestimated the number of college students who have STDs, guessing that it was close to 15 percent rather than the actual 25.

Senior Hannah Hayes, although she has never taken a sexual-health course in her four years at Richmond, did know that Chlamydia was the most common disease on this campus. When asked if she thought Richmond students had enough information on STDs, Hayes said, "Yes, I think they have a sufficient understanding but don't practice safe sex accordingly."

When asked why, if students have a sufficient understanding of STDs, do they not practice safe sex properly, Hayes responded, "Because they're drunk."

Gormus said that students should be more proactive, use condoms, and get tested regularly. "Students should not be ashamed or embarrassed to get tested," she said. "Getting STD testing should be like making a dentist appointment -- you don't just go when you have a cavity to prevent a cavity. Much like cavities, STDs can go without symptoms so it is important to diagnose and treat promptly."

The Student Health Center also has 10,000 condoms that they "can and want to give away," Gormus said. If students wish to take advantage of these resources they can stop by the Student Health Center located in the Special Programs Building or schedule an appointment by calling (804) 289-8700.