

The VIth Latin American Congress on Paediatric and Adolescent Gynaecology took place in Havana in May 1999. This was a very full event with speakers from the whole of Central and South America, the Caribbean and also some speakers from North America and farther afield.

Bob Blum and Gail Slap participated as did Tomas Silber and several other stalwarts of the Adolescent Medicine community. It is indeed a credit to Jorge Pelaez that he led such a successful team. Doctor Mendoza is an Auxiliary Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Havana University School of Medicine and he is the President of Juvenile Section of the Society of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Cuba.

The articles that follow relate to the conference.

Early Pregnancy - Myths, Reality and Long Term Consequences.

Presented at VIth Latin American Congress on Paediatric and Adolescent Gynaecology

Dr Diana Birch

Teenage pregnancy and adolescent sexuality as been dogged by numerous myths and false perceptions - some of which have been extremely deep rooted and difficult to eradicate.

Debunking
Myths

The surveys and long term studies of young parents which we have conducted in the London area have shed light on these issues and debunked many of the myths.

Myths exert most influence when firmly planted in the belief system of the adolescent and perpetuated by the peer group - but frequently they are given birth and propagated by the media - a powerful force that can quickly spread misconceptions and endow them with a false legitimacy.

Promiscuity

So let us look at some basic myths regarding teenage couples - the girl is promiscuous - Well most of couples had known each other for more than six months, two thirds had been a couple for more than six months and in fact three quarters of them had been friends for more than six months. Most girls became pregnant by their first and only boyfriend. So this debunks two myths - that of the promiscuous schoolgirl and that of the fly-by-night, predatory boyfriends who just get girl pregnant.

Sexual
Education

Sexual education is another mine field - tell them about sex and they will go out and do it. This myth hides a deep prejudice against youth and against knowledge. There is no other area of life where we attempt to rationalise the withholding of knowledge from young people. Good decisions are made based on accurate factual knowledge - not prejudices and false beliefs. In our survey over 90% of pregnant schoolgirls had not had any significant sex education - 95% had not spoken to their

parents about it, most had missed sex education at school and the commonest source which was also the least accurate was school friends.

Myths about boyfriends - Are they just interested in sex and abandon their girlfriends when they get pregnant? Well of course some do - but on average this is not the case. Many of these baby fathers actually want to support their family, their baby, but they're not allowed to being marginalised by the girl's family or her carers; or they may be too young, schoolboys themselves and they don't earn money, don't have jobs. So we are talking about emotional support not financial support and nearly 60% were emotionally supportive of their baby mothers. We do have some cases where the boys were not notified about the pregnancy - although 90% were. Some boys who found out eventually were in quite a lot of stress, suddenly finding out they were fathers and not knowing about it, and also feeling guilty because if they had known, they would have wanted to support their family. An interesting fact which came out of the early part of our study is that 18% of baby fathers were actually present at the delivery. Now we have to remember, that fifteen years ago at the start of the longitudinal study, it wasn't *that* common for fathers to be in on deliveries.

Looking on at the long term figures again debunks the myth of the unsupportive boy. How many stay around for their young families? At two years from first birth about 45% are still involved, but it falls off with time although at fifteen years 20% are still in touch with their kids a fairly high figure really although if you look at the number of fathers that are still in touch, it's also very dependent on the background of the young couples. The girls who had families, were more likely to have their boyfriends be in touch, so they're more likely to be stable relationships. Where the girl had been in care, when their partners had been in care things were very different. And in fact at fifteen years, 20% of the whole population were in touch, but only 2% of those where the girls didn't have a family. Of course one could play devil's advocate and say - well what about the ones that dropped out - 80% are not there at 15 years - but I think that the most important thing is that if 20% are - it shows potential and willing - so what could we have done to keep the 45% who were around at 2 years still available to their children at 15 years?

Looking at the number of boys, this was interesting, because just under half of the girls had multiple boyfriends and were repeating pregnancy. 39% had only one boyfriend, one sexual relationship over the fifteen years, which is quite a surprising fact, so these girls are not promiscuous.

And another interesting little myth to debunk - that of the early substitute father - I am sure we have all seen girls who come to the antenatal clinic and they're pregnant, and their boyfriend has dumped them. And at the next clinic they bring a new boyfriend saying that he

Boyfriends

Substitute Fathers



wants to be considered as the father - most clinic staff shake their head and assume he will also be gone in a short time - but not so this 12% of early substitute fathers are boys who it seems have a real need to be a father. He takes on this ready-made family, the girl and the baby because he's the sort of boy who needs to look after people, and is a carer, and interestingly, these were the boys who were much more likely to stay over the period of time. Of these early substitute fathers they were nearly all still there at fifteen years. They were much more likely to stay than the natural fathers, which I think is very interesting and it just shows the need that some boys have to be fathers is very similar to the need that some girls have to be mothers.

Housing

Let us look at another myth - that of the girl who gets pregnant to obtain a council flat, better living conditions, welfare money. One glance at any of our cases shows that to be the lie that it is - but whole papers can and have been written on the 'culture of poverty' that teenage pregnancy is. In the International conference on adolescent gynaecology in Cuba 1999 we heard over and over about the poverty of girls in Uruguay, Brazil, Chile and it is not a phenomenon limited to Latin America by any means - London is another example . Housing can be squalid, squats or families can remain homeless for many years. Poverty and dietary deficiencies perpetuate from one generation to the next as is evidenced in the poor dietary record of pregnant girls - thirty four percent had very poor diets and no employed adult in the home - coupled with low birth weight and prematurity in their children. This factors also associated with high perinatal mortality.

Adoption

So, people say, why leave children with young mothers? Would they not be better off adopted or placed with good families and would the girls not do better if unburdened by these children? This myth must be eradicated once and for all in order to make any positive change in the lives of young parents and their offspring. Repeatedly it has been show that children placed in care fare worse than those raised by their parents

Care System

Girls in the care system had more pregnancies, more boyfriends who stayed around for shorter periods, they had more of their children removed into care and fared worse on every parameter researched. Their children had more problems at five, ten and fifteen years. A perpetuating negative spiral of deprivation and misery.

Father Figures

Another misconception here is that the influence of a father figure on the young mother has been emphasised without considering the effect on the boy. It is accepted that girls may be predisposed to getting pregnant because they come from single parent families, they don't have a father and so they need to go out and find a boy because they don't know how to relate to men, they've got an absence of a father figure in their lives. What the fifteen year study showed was how important it was, especially to the first born male children, this absence of father. For example in

children of teenage mothers at fifteen years - behaviour problems in the girls - 20%, in the boys - 70%. More boys bullied than girls, more boys having minor crime than girls. The relationship with the mother, worse for the boys than for the girls, as you might expect. Smoking is about the same, alcohol more in boys, drugs more in boys, sex education - the girls are more likely to talk to mum so sex education is better. Sexual activities - the boys had more girlfriends, the boys had more sex.

Finally let us consider some of the psychological myths ... which could and do take up a whole thesis of their own. Firstly linking with the commonly held misconception that contraception is the answer. Yes, we need better contraceptive services for youth, but these are worse than useless if the young people themselves do not see the need or wish to use them. Inability to see the consequences of their actions, concrete thinking, and lack of a future time perspective all impact here.

I have described 'magical thinking'. To explain briefly, young people have a set of belief systems governed by their society, family, peer group and we can confront these beliefs and educate by working on the level of the internal parent (beliefs and prejudices) or the internal adult (factual knowledge) confronting myths such as 'you can't get pregnant the first time' with 20% of girls got pregnant the first time they had sex - or 'you don't get pregnant if you do it standing up' confronted with sperm can swim up hill. But underneath these considerations and beliefs is the 'magical' level of thinking - governed by the inner child, primitive fundamental and based on emotion and not on logic. The denial, the it can't happen to me, the belief in the 'autonomous womb' that gets pregnant all by itself - a complete manifestation of the external locus of control.

And then there is the myth of 'the only thing I can do right is have a baby' - a false solution and a condemnation of youth. Our self esteem study showed that in response to deprivation and particularly sexual traumata - young mother's self esteem fell - but pregnant teens were protected by their pregnancy from the true impact of these assaults - they believed in themselves while pregnant and this gave them a better sense of self during the early months of the child's life - but it did not last - hence repeat pregnancies. What we need to do is to give these young people something else to value in themselves - to value themselves as women or as young men and not only as mothers and fathers.

Denial

Self Esteem

**Poor Use of
Contraception**

