

**Hampton Roads' youth in crisis: Contracting HIV**

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*By Dr. John Chittick*

**"I didn't know nothin' about AIDS.** He was my first real boyfriend and was going into the Navy. I was thinking only about love.... Now my life's over, and I'm only 17!"

 "Carly" - who agreed to tell her story only if I didn't reveal her real name - is a junior at a high school in Hampton Roads. Blond hair falls across her face, wet with tears of regret and the realization that a horrible mistake has occurred. She whispers, "It's not fair." Like many teens, it is hard for her to accept the consequences of her actions.

 Carly had no idea that Hampton Roads is now the epicenter of HIV/AIDS in Virginia, and Norfolk is No. 1. "I wish someone had told me about this stuff." Yet her ignorance was not really her fault.

 Yes, she made the decision to have unprotected sex with her boyfriend. But her school has not provided any meaningful AIDS education for years since the story fell off the public's radar.

 When the head of her school was offered the free services of this AIDS expert, his answer was disheartening: "You have to understand that it's not really a problem for us like it might be at other schools because our students are not into things like that... and we can't make the time with our focus on SOLs and sports."

 Carly and her boyfriend did well on the tests and won on the playing fields, but they lost the most important game of all. Today, she is a new statistic in the state's medical records.

 Dec. 1 is World AIDS Day, the 30th anniversary of the public's first awareness of a mysterious disease in Africa and a few American cities. In the U.S., gay men were among the early victims, but in Africa HIV/AIDS was spread through heterosexual contact. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that 25 percent of all new cases of HIV in the U.S. occur among teens. Unfortunately, AIDS has become passé, a sleeper issue - but not for vulnerable teens.

 We have entered an era of a new sexual revolution. Similar to the 1960s when the Woodstock generation exercised its new freedoms, youth today are experimenting with casual sex at much younger ages and with more partners. By age 16 the majority are sexually active regardless of race, gender and economic status. And they proudly share their sexual exploits with peers in text messages (including sexting), on Facebook and in unabashed conversations in schools everywhere.

 Teens have found that sex is free, fun and easily available. Carly appears to be an all-American girl - but she has a deadly secret. Her boyfriend shared his secret with her, and now she is infected.

Currently, there is no cure or vaccine for AIDS because HIV continues to mutate from one unsuspecting partner to another. The human cost is astronomical. So why wouldn't we as a society insist that our maturing adolescents be educated?

 We are facing a global pandemic of heterosexually transmitted youth HIV. And the clock is ticking here in Hampton Roads. The key to curbing the spread of teen AIDS is empowering young volunteers to reach out to their friends so the message grows exponentially. It doesn't cost taxpayers anything. And teens make the most convincing messengers.

 If only Carly had heard that message.

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