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# THE GLOOMY TRAGEDY OF TEENAGE PREGNANCY

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Back in 1999, the Government's Teenage Pregnancy Unit published its strategy to 'halve the rate of conceptions among under 18-year-olds in England by 2010; and to set a firmly-established downward trend in the conception rates for under 16s by 2010.' Remember that? It is something which some people would want you to forget.

We have always maintained that this was a laudable aim – teenage pregnancies are rarely a good idea; but we have always regarded that aim as unachievable – at least, by the methods proposed. And time is almost up for this grand social experiment with our children. What do the latest results look like? Answer – abysmal.

The grand plan was to improve the quality of sex education and teenagers' access to contraception (including a ready supply of condoms, the pill and the morning-after pill, plus, when all else failed, abortion). Once that was achieved, it was believed, the numbers of conceptions would inevitably decrease – but, they did not. In fact, in many towns and cities they actually increased.

So the government stepped up its campaign, under the great delusion that more and more of a failing policy must eventually work. Free contraceptives were dished out on school premises. Teenage girls were censured for copying 'celebrity' mums. VAT was removed from contraceptives. Girls were condemned for getting pregnant simply to jump up the housing list. Parents were then blamed for telling their children what was right and wrong. Girls were accused of using the MAP as a long-term contraceptive. Pregnancy 'hot spots' in cities were targeted. Sex education in primary schools was proposed. Long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARC) were recommended for recalcitrant teenage girls. And so on. Never a word about 'abstinence' – except to dismiss it as 'naïve' and 'unworkable.'

The latest official figures, relating to 2007, have just been released. They have all increased. A total of 42,918 girls aged under 18 became pregnant throughout England and Wales – up by 1,150 on the previous year. Among the under 16s, a total of 8,196 girls became pregnant – up by 370. The

government's all-important indicator, conception rates, are also up from 40.9 conceptions per 1,000 girls in 2006 to 41.9 in 2007 for the under 18-year-olds, and from 7.8 to 8.3 for girls under 16. The other facet of teenage conception, namely teenage abortion, showed that 50.0% of these 2007 pregnancies ended in abortion – up 2% compared with 2006.

The government's target to halve teenage conceptions by 2010 is now utterly unattainable. As we come towards the end of this 10-year strategy, one might expect the decline to be approaching the 50% target – say 35-40%. In fact the real overall percentage decline between the 1998 baseline and 2007 has been just a miserable 11%.

What is the government's response to these cheerless figures? On the very day that they were announced, the government pledged an extra £20.5m to 'help young people get better access to contraception and support for teenagers and raise the awareness of the risks of unprotected sex.' This is simply more, more and more of the same.

When will the government listen? The problem and its solution are not that convoluted. Last month I took my car to be serviced. The garage owner kindly lent me his sports car for the day – it is capable of rushing up to 134 mph. Driving home, I came to a long stretch of open road. What did I do? Yes, speed is fun, and I certainly had the means. Sex is fun and now we have given every teenager the means. But, I am an experienced driver (as well as a magistrate!) so I controlled myself and broke no laws. By contrast, teenagers are generally inexperienced, lack self-control and typically enjoy a bit of risk-taking. They are also curious but inordinately vulnerable. So what do we do? We offer them, in fact, we insist on giving them, the means to get into trouble and become moral lawbreakers. We are grooming our children. Yes, of course, hold teenagers responsible for their actions, but we, as adults, are not devoid of blame. We seem to be afraid to tell our children to say 'No.'

Dr John R Ling

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