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Time to stand up for the condom

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IN HER day job, Anne Philpott coaches porn stars to use condoms as if they relish them - as sexual accessories that signify an escalation of desire rather than a dutiful interruption.

But she has also been moonlighting for one of the world's most prestigious medical journals, with essentially the same message: that in their urgency to persuade people to use condoms to protect against bacteria and viruses, health agencies have neglected to mention that sex is fun.

The director of the Pleasure Project (www.the-pleasure-project.org) has penned a challenging editorial in *The Lancet* this week, arguing that the best way to increase the use of condoms is to eroticise them.

"Pleasure - and even sex itself - has been noticeably absent from much of the dialogue surrounding [sexually transmitted infection] and the spread of HIV/AIDS," Philpott wrote in the publication, timed to coincide with World AIDS Day last Friday.

"Since demand for condoms is low, partly because they are thought to diminish sexual pleasure, then exclusive emphasis on negative messages such as disease control ... is likely to have limited success."

Condoms can be not just neutral but positively aphrodisiac, Philpott says. A woman can discreetly flash a little foil packet at her partner, as a saucy promise for later. The female condom, with concentric ridges that fit around the base of the penis and outside the vagina, can provide physical stimulation for both. That is in addition to the erotic benefit of knowing the encounter is relatively free from risk, and the relaxation that follows.

Philpott says scaring people excessively about the possibility of infection is at odds with the World Health Organisation definition of sexual health, which states it is "a state of physical, emotional, mental and social wellbeing in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity".

Partly funded by the development charity CARE International, Philpott's organisation has documented the success of safer sex promotion programs, "bold enough to include pleasure as a motivating factor", nominating among the best examples the marketing of studded condoms to Ugandan men, and an Indian brand containing local anaesthetic to delay ejaculation.

Philpott, a self-styled Pleasure Propagandist, found her calling when she heard a health researcher at an AIDS conference speak euphemistically (and unappealingly) of "the insertive probe and the receptive cavity". After it dawned on her that they were describing the penis and vagina, she resolved

to put the sex back into safe sex.

Over-earnest and passion-killing messages about protection are common in materials for gay and straight people, Philpott says. "We've done ourselves a disservice. So many things use sex to sell them - cars, books, toothpaste - but we're not using it to sell condoms."

The Sydney obstetrician, gynaecologist and sexologist Jules Black says Philpott's critique is welcome. "It's absolutely spot on," he says. "I think it's a terrific wake-up call."

The academic clout of *The Lancet* should ensure health professionals at least give the ideas a serious hearing, says Black. But he cautions that recasting condoms as sex toys might be confronting for men with erection problems. "Suddenly you stop the act and that penis is centre stage. You've got to be able to get the thing on."

Dr Sally Cockburn is a Melbourne general practitioner who goes by the name Dr Feelgood in a medical advice letters page she edits for *Girlfriend*. "That magazine is aimed at 13-year-old girls, and I just talk about [condom use] as a natural sort of event," she says. "I drop it into the conversation all the time: 'When you do start to have sex, of course you'll use a condom.' The way to really get the message across is by normalising them."

Cockburn says she does not believe overt sex-focused campaigns are needed to promote condom use, and that reaching people early in their sexual life - or preferably even before they begin - is the key to fostering a routine condom habit.

"We don't think twice about putting a seatbelt on," she says. "We shouldn't think twice about using a condom."

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