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WETZSTEIN: Sounding alarm on gonorrhea

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Washington, D.C., is filled with people who are genuine experts on their issues. So my news antenna always perks up when I hear someone who I know is smart, savvy and deeply invested in his issue say he has "missed" something.

William Smith, whom I have quoted for years based on his extensive knowledge about teen pregnancy and sexual health issues, has written an article for RHReality Check.org. It is called, "What I didnt know about sexual health."

Mr. Smith is executive director of the National Coalition of STD Directors, a trade group for people working to stem the tide of sexually transmitted diseases. I think his observations are valid — and alarming — enough to be repeated here.

- "We are on the verge of a highly untreatable gonorrhea epidemic," he writes.

Gonorrhea, once in decline, has thoroughly rebounded, with more than 336,000 cases reported in 2008. It disproportionately affects young people and blacks. Untreated gonorrhea increases risk for HIV infection and can lead to infertility, among other undesirable outcomes.

Years ago, gonorrhea was easily cured with antibiotics. But, as Mr. Smith writes, "Bacteria have a funny way of developing resistance to treatments" — its as if they have "their own built-in evolutionary survival mode."

Gonorrhea has mutated so efficiently that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has "just a single class of antibiotics left" to treat it, and resistance is forming even to those drugs, Mr. Smith writes. With a "nearly empty" pipeline of new drugs to fight gonorrhea, "the prospects of this situation are frightening."

- "We are about to grasp defeat from the jaws of victory in the battle against syphilis."

Syphilis was once even closer to eradication than gonorrhea, but now "the nations efforts to combat syphilis ... have virtually collapsed," Mr. Smith writes.

In 2008, the United States had 13,500 syphilis cases — the highest since 1995 — and another 431 cases of mother-child-transmitted congenital syphilis.

"In Chicago last year," Mr. Smith recalled, "one colleague told me that two babies died of congenital syphilis."

"Yes, in the 21st century United States of America, children die of syphilis. Where is the outcry?"

Mr. Smith also writes about how STD workers who search out sex partners of infected people (a job that requires "Columbo-like detective skills," chutzpah and compassion) are "unsung heroes," and how the STD-fighting world has an unacceptably low level of political advocacy.

I particularly agree with Mr. Smith about the lack of advocacy on STDs. It seems as if the media, like everyone else, aren't eager to talk about STDs (at least beyond the "marquee" disease of AIDS).

That might be fine, except the U.S. is in the throes of a massive STD epidemic.

I watched last year as the media beat the drums for the H1N1 virus. People kept throwing around the "pandemic" word, and in August, a White House council said the nation was facing a "plausible scenario" of as many as 1.8 million hospitalizations and up to 90,000 deaths just in the coming months. Full-court-press hysteria ensued.

In February, however, the CDC said that if all swine flu events were counted (back to April 2009), fewer than 378,000 people were hospitalized and fewer than 17,160 people died, with the most likely toll being 11,690.

Perhaps the August projections were exaggerated, but there is no doubt that an alarmed nation responded.

I haven't seen the American STD epidemic get upgraded to a pandemic, but with 19 million newly reported STD cases each year, it sure could be.

And we are not talking about 19 million cases of annoying but nonfatal genital skin problems, either. Every year, 20,000 Americans die of diseases contracted by risky sexual behavior, says a 2004 study by Ali Mokdad published in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

Without a doubt, a tsunami of sexual disease is flooding our population. One would think there could be a few more headlines about it.

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