

## **TMAP Second Annual Report**

In its second year of operation, the Teenage Magazine Arbitration Panel has met only twice, to exercise its duty of oversight of the sexual content of the magazines within its remit. There have been no complaints.

Whatever the reason, during the second year of TMAP's operation, the sexual content of teenage girls' magazines fulfilled all the self-regulatory standards set by the industry; as monitored by the independent Teenage Magazine Arbitration Panel, and evidenced by a zero complaint rating.

Publishers, editors, agony aunts and uncles (and the Chair of the TMAP panel), has focussed during the last year on collaboration with other groups concerned with aspects of teenage sexual health. The Periodical Publishers Association (PPA), has worked with the Department of Health (DOH), campaigning to reduce teenage pregnancy, and are launching in summer 1999 a series of adverts developed with the ad agency Delaney Fletcher Bozell, on this theme. The agency has invested much research and design talent, being committed to the importance of the issue to individual young people and their families as well as recognising the public health perspective.

This aspect of teenage sexual health has dominated Government and media concern, policy issues relating to teenage pregnancy being handed over to the Cabinet Office's social exclusion unit. As in the United States, teenage pregnancy (more specifically, teenage motherhood), has come to be seen as a major causative factor in the cycle of poverty. However, research from the U.S.A. shows that 80% of teenage mothers were living in poverty or near poverty long before they became pregnant (1). In the U.K., several aspects of teenage health, including pregnancies in young women under 16 and under 20, are linked with social disadvantage. This is strongly indicated by the statistics of under-age conceptions which show a six-fold variation between the lowest incidence in leafy S.E.England and the highest in the Minister of Public Health's own inner London constituency. The pattern is repeated in the markedly higher incidences of sexually transmitted diseases in inner city young women under 20, with their potential for causing long-term health problems including the frequently preventable tragedy of infertility. These trends have deep roots in the economic and social structure of society, which can be addressed only by Government, and are well outside any effect that teenage magazines or any other publication could be expected to exert.

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In the autumn of 1998, as TMAP Chair, I shared the platform with a team from the Brook Advisory Clinics at a meeting for agony aunts of teenage magazines, where Brook presented the results of a survey of their clients. The Brook Clinic survey (2) showed that young women look to their magazines as a reliable and competent source of advice, which help to make good the gaps in their education on sex and relationships. Neither school nor parents were reported as major sources of information and guidance by the Brook Survey participants, who were all clinic attendees, and thus likely to represent the views of sexually active teenage girls and young women. The respondents particularly asked for more information on relationships and on sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Young people know what information they need to help them with important life decisions, and that for many both parents and schools signally fail to provide.

Since that survey, information well known to epidemiologists has now hit the popular media: the fact that the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) has risen by over 30% in both young men and women under 20 in just one year according to the most recent statistics (2).

Careful academic surveys, in places as apparently dissimilar as Somerset (3) and Glasgow (4), indicate a rapid rate of change in sexual lifestyles of young people over a five-year period. Both surveys reveal a continuing demand for information on sexual health and STDs including HIV/AIDS, and national statistics confirm this continuing need. Magazines were mentioned as a preferred source of education on sexual matters by no less than one in four teenage boys in Glasgow.

Problem pages of girls' teen magazines continue to reveal the anguish of sexual abuse and the uncertainty of the adolescent in how get help. Columnists provide support and information, whilst editorial material can facilitate recognition and discussion of abusive situations, with their potential for pervasive long-lasting impact on physical and psychological health.

The role of the teenage magazines in providing accessible, acceptable information to many young people, as indicated by their healthy circulation figures, thus remains significant in British society. It is regrettable that no similar reader-friendly resource is available for adolescent boys, who currently have to make do with reading their sisters' and girl friends' magazines!

The zero complaint situation clearly will not continue in the current year. However, it is a credit to editorial responsiveness to the actual situations of young peoples' lives that, to date, teenagers have not figured amongst complainants.

Magazines aimed at girls under 15 mirror many aspects of teen culture, reflecting both the exuberance and the uncertainties of youth, their need for acceptance, information and social support in their transformation to adult members of society.

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TMAP recognises the seriousness of its particular role and will continue to act with a vigorous independence in monitoring the magazines within their remit, considering complaints with thoughtful reference to the Guidelines agreed with both the industry and the Home Office.

It has been a privilege to act as Chair for a further year. The panel would wish to record their thanks for the administrative support of Jens Bammel and Safo Kordestani in this year's work.

Dr. Fleur Fisher  
Chairman, Teenage Magazine Arbitration Panel, 1998

### References:

- 1) Dubious Conceptions, the Politics of Teenage Pregnancy, By Kristin Luker, pub. Harvard University Press, 1997
- (2) New Cases seen at GUM Clinics in England and Wales, 1997, Hughes et al, Communicable Diseases Report, vol 8, supplement 7, December 98
- (3) Changes in Drug Use and Sexual Life Styles of Young People in Somerset 1990-1996 by Nicholas Ford et al pub University of Exeter, 1997
- (4) Health Behaviour of Scottish School Children, Sex Education Personal Relationships and HIV/AIDS Knowledge and Attitudes in 1990 and 1994 Report 6 by C. Currie et al pub by RUHBC, University of Edinburgh 1997