

**THE ROLE OF TEENAGE MAGAZINES IN THE SEXUAL
HEALTH OF YOUNG PEOPLE**

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The Role of Teenage Magazines in the Sexual Health of Young People

I am pleased to have been asked to introduce this working paper, which has been produced as part of a process aimed at ensuring closer liaison between publishers of teenage magazines and relevant experts in the field of sex education and adolescent health.

High quality sex education is essential to enable young people to understand their own development and to prepare for the choices and responsibilities in adult life. Magazines can play a valuable contributory role in providing accurate health information and guidance. While premature sexual involvement is inimical to physical and mental health, adolescents have many questions and anxieties about sex and relationships which need to be addressed in a frank manner appropriate to their age. This research is helpful in identifying young people's information needs and how teenage magazines can exercise their role responsibly in conjunction with that of parents, schools and health professionals.

Dr Sandy Macara
Chairman of Council
British Medical Association

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Executive Summary

In February 1996, Peter Luff, Tory MP for Worcester, proposed a Bill which would require publishers to place age suitability warnings on the cover of young women's magazines, in an effort to allay concerns about their use of sexually explicit material.

This report examines the debate on teenage magazines and analyses the current sources of information available to young people on sexual related issues. As a review of current research, this document suggests that there is certainly an important role for teenage magazines in the sexual health education of young people, and that they provide information which can empower young people to make informed choices on sexual issues.

A key factor in this debate is the emergence of more open discussion about sex, following the increasing concern about AIDS. A new explicit language has become necessary and therefore more acceptable to society. In this context, is it realistic to accuse teenage magazines of creating this new sexually aware teenage girl or are teenage magazines merely reflecting the way this age group is changing within society? More specifically is criticism of these magazines a case of shooting the messenger?

This research clearly indicates that young people prefer to get their information on sex from printed sources rather than from adults and that there is a need to ensure that teenage magazines continue to contain information which enable young people to adopt safer sex behaviour and exercise healthy choices in their personal lives.

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This briefing looks at the contribution of magazines to the sexual health and well being of young women. It received its impetus from the Luff Bill, but the issues covered are likely to be of perennial concern.

The terms of the Luff Bill?

On February 6th, Peter Luff, Tory MP for Worcester, requested permission of the House of Commons to bring in the Periodicals (Protection of Children) Bill, requiring publishers to display an age suitability warning on the front cover of young women's magazines. The Bill originated amid growing concern about the explicit nature of teenage magazines and Peter Luff's specific anxieties for the effect of these on his 11 year old daughter. The focus of criticism was that these magazines encourage girls to think it is normal to have sex before the age of sexual consent.

The main objective of the Bill then was to ensure that the contents of magazines read by young people, male or female, are age-appropriate and factually accurate and to ensure general decency among magazines (House of Commons Official Report, 1996). The Bill received widespread parliamentary support in February 1996 but was opposed in March, and finally withdrawn by Luff in July 1996. Nevertheless the Bill raises some important questions, in particular would the terms of such a Bill be feasible? and are they desirable?

Would age rating work?

Imposing an age suitability warning would only doubtfully have the desired effect of deterring potential readers. Audience research tells us that young women often choose the titles of their magazines because they identify with the target audience rather than belong to it, so that titles for older girls have aspirational appeal for younger girls. The likely consequences of this for regulation were spelled out by the Luff Bill's opponents. The arguments against the Bill in terms of feasibility were forcibly made by Simon Hughes, Liberal Democrat MP for Southwark and Bermondsey:

..... once we flag up that a magazine is for 17 year olds and above, we create the greatest incentive in the world for 14 and 15 year olds to read it because they always want to see something that is for older people. The clause would, therefore, have the wrong effects.....

We must not end up with an age marking that makes these magazines more rather than less appealing.... a health warning on covers would actually increase sales.

Legislation of the type suggested in Luff's Bill then could be counter-productive, tempting young women to read magazines for an older target audience. The second argument mounted by opponents related more to practicality, namely that Luff's recommendations would be impossible to implement. Ministers believed that the suggested requirement in Luff's Bill that publishers should print suitable age limits on covers of magazines would be unenforceable.

If we say that a publication is unsuitable for youngsters below 15, 16 or even 18 regulation would probably be impossible. Simon Hughes MP.

As a Private Members Bill the Luff Bill was unlikely to become law, not least because its recommendations were seen by many as unworkable. Yet this is not to say that its principles were invalid. If the Bill's objectives are considered worthwhile but not achievable by that mechanism, it follows that some other means of meeting them should be sought. For many, including Luff himself, a voluntary code was anyway preferable to legislation. One of the main purposes of introducing it was, as Luff said, that the possibility of legislation would offer publishers an opportunity to reflect on the issues.

The editorial balance of magazines: how dominant is the subject of sex?

The charge is sometimes made that young women's magazines are dominated by sex; that the subject takes up an ever increasing proportion of their content (McRobbie, 1996). Yet a review of articles in *Bliss* in the last few months of 1996 showed just 8% of articles to be about sex, only half that devoted to fashion. In *Just Seventeen* during this period, the space allocated to articles on sex was only marginally higher, at 10%, and again the subject received less coverage than fashion.

The furore caused by the Bill may well have reflected wider apprehensions surrounding teenage sexuality. One feature of today's enlightened times is that more is open to surveillance. Teenage magazines provide adults with a window on the world of teenagers, and behaviour which might once have been covert is now visible. The attack on magazines may be a case of shooting the messenger.

The preoccupation with sex in teenage magazines is, in part at least, a response to changing sexual mores among young people. Sex does assume a greater significance in the lives of young people today than was formerly the case. Sexual activity begins considerably earlier than it did in the previous generation. Research reveals major changes in sexual attitudes and lifestyles of young people during the last 30 to 40 years (Wellings, 1994; Johnson, 1994), notably:

- ***a progressive reduction in the age at which sexual intercourse first takes place:*** Age at first intercourse has fallen by four years for women, from 21 to 17, and by three years for men, from 20 to 17.
- ***a decrease in the time period between first experience and first intercourse:*** For young women today the time lapse between first sexual experience and sexual intercourse is two years compared with four in the previous generation.
- ***an increase in the number of young people who have sexual intercourse before the age of 16*** (the legal age of sexual consent in England, the age is 17 in Scotland): Nearly one in five women and more than one in four men under the age of 20 have had intercourse before this age.
- ***premarital sex as the norm for both men and women:*** Fewer than one per cent of young women are married at the time of first sexual intercourse.
- ***gender convergence in sexual experience:*** The gap between men and women has been closing, so that the average age at first intercourse is now the same for men and women.

These are dramatic social changes and have major implications in terms of sex education and the provision of preventive services for the young. Recent years have also seen a sea change in what is permitted public expression. An important question therefore is whether magazines are simply reflecting a trend towards greater sexual activity among the young, or leading it.

The pre-occupation with sex and the increasing focus on frank and explicit sexual representations is partly the result of greater sexual activity among the young. A further influence on the increased openness about sexual matters has certainly been the necessity for open discussion in the face of AIDS. The language of safer sex has provided a licence, and - many would argue - a need, for magazines to carry material which ten or fifteen years ago would have been unthinkable.

Does reading about sex encourage early activity?

"Does it matter? Does open discussion about sex encourage girls into promiscuity?"
Peter Luff MP 1996, Votes and Proceedings of the House of Commons

The suggestion is made by some that open discussion about sex encourages early sexual experimentation and promiscuity. Yet the evidence seems to be to the contrary. Research suggests that when information comes from an authoritative source, as opposed to friends, it is more likely to delay onset of sexual activity than hasten it (Wellings 1995). Open discussion of sexual matters can lead to greater ability to negotiate sexual relationships and safer sex (Rudat & Speed, 1993).

The chief complaint though is rather that the discussion may encourage young women to see early sexual activity as the norm, and that by presenting sexual experience as the norm it thereby legitimates it. In fact, as we have seen from the national figures, sexual intercourse in the first half of the teenage years is not the norm, although it is becoming more common. Yet the impression in teenage magazines is that it is near universal.

The 'herding' instinct

As in possibly no other activity, in our sexual behaviour we strive to be normal and a good deal of anxiety is triggered by the thought that we might not be so. But what is normal?

Since sexual behaviour is conducted in private, we have no way of knowing what others are doing except from their own reports. Hence the avid attention paid to sex surveys. The problem then becomes which reports to rely on for our notion of average. There is a considerable difference in the rates reported in the scientific random sample surveys and those culled from magazine surveys based on volunteer samples. The British sexual behaviour survey showed that just over a quarter of boys and one in five girls aged 16 to 24 have sex before the age of 16. Magazines present far higher incidence figures than these. The March issue of *Sugar* contained a 16 page booklet entitled 'Sex and You' in which it was reported that 52% of respondents had lost their virginity before age of 16. A readers' sex survey amongst its readers in *It's Bliss* in 1996 showed that 82% of under 16 year old readers had had intercourse.

The findings from these surveys using self-selected volunteer samples are not representative of young people as a whole. Readers of *Sugar* and *Its Bliss* are not typical of the global teenage population, and those who respond to questionnaires within the magazine are even less so, being not even typical of readers in general. Readers who feel inclined to voluntarily disclose details of their personal lives are different from those who do not. The bias is likely to be towards the more sexually

active. But in the absence of any other evidence, these figures could come to represent the prevailing peer group norm.

Such coverage is likely to be self-fulfilling. The herding instinct is exaggerated in the teenage years when conformity to a group norm and identity is particularly important. Kent & Davis (1992) note anxiety about remaining a virgin longer than others.

Was there any pressure from your friends to lose your virginity?

Um Yeah

What sort of thing would they say

Oh you know, "God, you're really old" and you know they'd been sort of doing it since they were about 14

So how did you feel?

I felt a real square and prude and thought I'd put a stop to it. But I got a terrible reputation after being with him, so I went from being a prude to being a real slag.

(19 year old woman, 16 at the time. Kent & Davis, 1993)

The first time I had sex I didn't use anything because it was me at 17 and the only virgin in my class and I thought I was the last person in the world that has never had it. And so the opportunity came along and it was just "Whatever she's got I can't resist it".

(Young man interviewed by Kent & Davis)

Is early sexual activity a bad thing?

Underlying the Luff bill is the premise that the trend towards earlier sexual experience is to be resisted and if possible reversed. This is the conventional wisdom and many people feel intuitively that it is right, but it is worth examining the reasons why it might be so.

Much is made of the notion of 'readiness' as if there were a fixed time to have sex. There is no absolute logic about sex at any one age. Biologically, a young person is ready for sexual experience at the point at which they become physically mature but the age deemed socially appropriate varies through time and across societies. In the Middle Ages the legal age for marriage of girls in England was 12 and for men 14. In the Trobriand Islands adults do not mind if children engage in sexual play and attempt precociously to perform the sexual act, and adolescents may sleep with one another provided only that they are not in love with one another.

This is not to say that this would be desirable in our society. In modern industrialised societies young people are expected to delay serious mating and

childbearing until they have completed the relatively lengthy process of induction into their adult roles. In only a few societies does biological sexual maturity coincide with the age deemed socially acceptable and the number is declining. But the point is that the rules which we see as strictly governing sexual behaviour are not absolute, but culturally and historically specific. Whether young people in any society perceive themselves as ready to become sexually active will depend not only on a whole set of biological, psychological and physical factors but also on social and cultural assumptions and expectations. To what extent a young person is 'signed up' to these will depend on how realistic they seem for him or her. For someone who sees little hope of academic progress early sexual activity may provide feelings of self esteem and self worth.

It is the disjuncture between maturational readiness for sexual activity and the social approved timing of its occurrence which underlies many of the problems relating to the maintenance of sexual health of young people. A balance has constantly to be sought between providing the necessary education, information and resources with which young people can safeguard their sexual health and avoiding appearing to encourage premature sexual activity.

What are the arguments for delaying intercourse?

The most compelling arguments for delaying first intercourse are based on evidence of its consequences. Early experience of sexual intercourse is more likely to be accompanied by feelings of regret, is associated with larger numbers of sexual partners, both in the recent past and over a lifetime, and - of greatest importance in terms of health consequences - is less likely to be protected from unplanned pregnancy (Wellings et al, 1994, Johnson, et al 1994).

The younger the girl at first intercourse the sooner it occurred in the relationship and for almost half of the girls first intercourse was unplanned. Although almost half used contraception on the first occasion, only one third of the girls used contraceptives regularly. Most expressed the wish that they had delayed intercourse until they were older. (Curtis et al, 1988)

The general consensus in the research is that regret over the timing of early experience is not uncommon amongst young people. More than a third of women aged 16 to 24 considered their first experience of intercourse to have been too soon, and the figure rises to half if they were under 16 at the time. Women are twice as likely as men to reflect that their first intercourse happened too early. This may be because first sexual experience for young women is often a disappointing experience, partly because the reality fails to live up to the expectations.

It was so different from what I'd imagined. I was just so detached from it. I was thinking "Well is this what happens then?" When you see it on television and read about it in romantic novels and that sort of thing it is totally different.

*You see all these love scenes on TV and they are all panting away and saying that's lovely. And you think "Oh!" But when it comes to the real thing it's a big disappointment. I think it's the mass media that I get my expectations from.
(Young women interviewed by Kent and Davies, 1992)*

Teenage magazines do contain articles on how to enhance sexual pleasure. The suggestion has been made that they may thereby generate anxiety around performance and the perfection of technique (Kent and Davis, 1992), but by the same token, it is certainly to women's advantage to have it acknowledged that sexual pleasure is their right and to empower them to seek it.

Failure to use contraception

The younger the respondent at the time of first intercourse, the greater the likelihood that first intercourse will be unprotected. Nearly half of young women and more than half of young men who have intercourse before the age of 16 report no method used either by themselves or by a partner. This proportion falls to 32% of women and 36% of men aged 16 and over at first intercourse (Wellings, 1994).

There are several reasons for failure to protect early intercourse. Neglect may reflect a reluctance to seek contraceptive supplies or advice for an act which, if it involves a young woman under the age of 16, is against the law. Issues relating to lack of self esteem and confidence are therefore important determinants of usage (Christopher, 1992). Alternately, failure to protect intercourse might reflect the sporadic nature of sexual activity in this age group. The pill requires continuing motivation and some teenagers lead disorganised lives so that they find it difficult to take it regularly. The suggestion is made by some that failure to protect intercourse may be partly attributable to the lack of a suitable script on the part of women. Whilst some women are confident enough to insist on condoms being used others, especially younger women, are less sure of themselves and struggle to know what to say if the man offered any resistance to a suggestion that he should wear a condom (Davis and Kent, 1992).

What is the educational role for teenage magazines?

Filling the knowledge gap

Despite the assumed sexual sophistication of the young, the evidence is that ignorance about sex is still a problem for many. More than two thirds of the sample

of people interviewed for the British Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles saw themselves as inadequately prepared in terms of information on sexual matters at the time of their first sexual experience.

The proportion of respondents claiming that they 'knew enough' has not increased among younger age groups as might have been expected. NSSAL showed that the majority - more than two thirds of men and women - said they did not have enough information about sexual matters at the time of first intercourse, and the proportion was virtually as high amongst young people as it was amongst the older generation.

The situation will improve with greater provision of sex education in schools. Schools have been playing an increasingly important role in the sexual education of the young, particularly for men. Yet schools can meet only part of the demand. Thompson et al (1992) report that although four out of five young people felt their school sex education was inadequate, there was satisfaction with the treatment of topics relating to physical and sexual maturity, pregnancy and childbirth as there was with coverage of topics relating to the adverse outcomes of sexual activity such as abortion, contraception and sexually transmitted diseases. Areas that are less well covered are the emotional and relationship aspects of sexuality.

The education that we got was mainly [about] what 'bits' people had. But in the female genitalia there was no mention of things like the clitoris or what it does, its importance. It was mainly that goes in there and produces a child.

Nobody ever talks to you about the problems and the entanglements and what it means to a relationship when you start having sex. Nobody ever actually discussed that sort of thing. They just seemed to expect that you would know and they were really too embarrassed to start telling you.

I think honestly that you need that [biological understanding] well not need it, but it's useful to know. But I think what is far more needed is the emotional side, and how you feel. And what exactly is going to happen, practically rather than biologically.

Young women interviewed by Thompson et al (1992)

Attempts have been made in recent years to reorient sex education towards a perspective informed by personal development (Thompson et al, 1992). The fact that some topics are not adequately covered by the school syllabus should not necessarily be interpreted as indicating that schools should attempt to fill all the gaps. The reality is that schoolteachers may not be the appropriate agencies. A good deal of nervousness and anxiety is felt among many teachers and many feel comfortable enough with the biological and health aspects of sexual behaviour but

less so dealing with personal relationships and the emotional aspects of sex. Legal and political constraints also lead to confusion.

School sex education is particularly ill-placed to deal with desire. In an environment in which the charge is often levelled that teaching about sex education encourages experimentation and early activity, it is difficult to legitimate discussion of sexual desire and sexual self knowledge. Similarly, young people themselves may feel those in authority over them and senior to them in years are inappropriate role models. Carried out badly, the business of sex education has the potential to cause more problems than it solves.

'The sex education class becomes a forum within which the two modes of adolescent sexuality and the authority of the school culture come into open confrontation and it is this juxtaposition that most clearly marks these young women's memories of the classes'. Young people challenge and embarrass the teacher (Thompson et al, 1992).

By the same token, young people rarely have all their questions answered in the family. Asked how easy or difficult it was for them to discuss sex with parents, 33% of young women and slightly more men (40%) rate this as difficult (Rudat and Speed, 1993). The proportion of parents willing to talk to their children about sex is low. Only 5% of young men and 17% young women cite their mother as their main source of information and fathers feature even less prominently (Wellings et al, 1994). Furthermore, the parental line is often concerned with protection and control.

Friends, by contrast, are easier to talk to, and are a major source of information for just over a third of men and just over a quarter of women. The problem here is one of accuracy. Much information exchanged between friends is transmitted by 'Chinese whispers', messages which are become distorted in circulation.

Magazines as preferred sources of information?

Several studies report that magazines are an important source of information, particularly with regard to sexual health (Davis and Harris, 1982). A medium so successful in identifying with the needs of adolescents could also serve as a credible reference with regard to health behaviour (Davies, 1986). Readers are at an impressionable and insecure age and the vast number of letters received by agony aunts suggest that girls value the advice given by magazines. Problem pages, in turn are the most popular among readers (Mitchell, 1996).

Luff himself acknowledged the part that magazines can play in encouraging freer discussion of sexuality and provision of facts. In the absence of reliable sources of information on the topics of greatest interest, the evidence is that young people frequently search for sexual references in any source which is to hand. These include 'dictionaries, `dirty' books, popular sex manuals and `bodice rippers' and - most commonly - magazines aimed at young women (Thompson et al, 1992). A study by the Children's Literature Research Centre of the Roehampton Institute attached to Surrey University has shown that more than three quarters of girls and nearly two thirds of boys preferred to get their information from printed sources rather than adults (C Hall, 23.2.96 Daily Telegraph).

Problem pages are frequently cited as sources of sexual information. Of a sample of 85 letters to the agony aunt of the teenage magazine Mizz, a third were about relationship problems (Personal communication with Tricia Kreitman)
".. magazines and other sources such as books and sex manuals often provided the young women we spoke to with their sole source of information concerning sexual pleasure" (Thompson et al, 1992).

I knew you could [get pleasure from sex] but I can't remember anybody telling me that. I mean you read about it in books and things

The potential for teenage magazines is therefore considerable. The seeking out of information in their covers which is not to be found elsewhere imposes on them a major social responsibility. But can editors be expected to have young people's pedagogical interests at heart? Magazines have to be commercial and there is a tension between gaining more readers and selling more copies and providing a service. Magazines naturally represent entertainment rather than education. All the same, there is clearly an important role for magazines in sex education.

Empowerment of women

Despite the criticism of the new wave of teenage magazines, many editorial reforms are undoubtedly beneficial. The tone may sometimes seem strident but many articles on sex are written so as to empower young women. Whilst magazines in the past have been criticised for portraying women as submissive and subordinate, now they are likely to be portrayed more as active initiators of sex than passive recipients of men's advances. McRobbie (1996) describes a new, sophisticated magazine for a more astute readership, in which true stories are in inverted commas, lest it might be assumed that the reader were naive enough to believe in them. Again, the magazines may be following a social trend as much as spear-heading it. Findings of recent US studies have shown that many US adolescents see their first experience of sexual intercourse as a conscious personal choice.

A shift towards greater initiative by women may be a good thing. Passivity does not serve women well in this respect. For younger girls especially there is often a feeling that sex happens to them and is not something they do (Cragge et al, 1993). MORI research for the HEA found that 76% agreed that "A woman who carries a condom is sensible" yet 40 % were embarrassed to buy them. Were women to become more brazen they might be better able to dictate the terms of sexual encounters, more able to be assertive about when and how their needs are met.

The 'dream ticket': parody or promise?

What also differentiates the newer magazines from the old breed is a jokey, more ironic tone, which pokes fun at the way sex is used to draw readers in. The 'dream ticket' is still offered, (though finding the man of one's dreams has been replaced to some extent for the more independent current generation of readers). Yet the touch of parody and the refusal of female naiveté creates opportunities for a more critical approach on the part of the reader. Teenage magazines are assumed to be read by a new and cleverer breed of cultural consumers, altogether more knowing, more aware of sexual politics, and more 'equal' in their relationships with men.

The evidence from readership surveys is that older teenage women, at least, read the magazines tongue in cheek, are aware of the sexist nature of magazines and are more resistant to what they see as stereotyping of girls (Thompson, 1992). Yet the degree to which readers are capable of reading reflexively and critically is likely to be related to age, and possibly also to class and educational level. Less mature readers are have been found to be more susceptible to influence (Mitchell, 1996).

You can't believe some of the things that you get in Just Seventeen, you can't believe that you took them seriously once.

It's Bliss Reader 14 -15

The fact is that the magazines are read by younger readers than is stated and there is evidence that they may take the views and behaviours of those in the magazines at face value:

It shows you what other girls go for, girls who are your age and older. I like to know what other people think because you can compare it with what you think.

Safer sex

Editors are clearly conscious of their role in encouraging safer sex both in 'home grown features' within the magazines and in supplements or articles inserted by health education agencies. Agencies like the HEA and the FPA have found that magazines offer one of the most effective vehicles for promoting information about

safe sex. This is potentially an ideal alliance, since magazines are more likely to be read by young people and official sources more likely to be factually accurate.

One problem for the official agencies is that association with the teenage magazines, because of the charge that they encourage early sex, makes them a target for criticism. An HEA safer sex feature in one women's magazine produced the headline: State cash helps fund 'teen sex' magazines (Telegraph 11.2.96; Jo Knowsley). Yet the HEA have found editors very willing to contribute expert advice and creative assistance in campaigns. This co-operative relationship is helped by large amounts of advertising money the HEA spends on magazines and also the responsibility of editors who are often acutely aware of the influence they wield among readers (Mitchell, 1996).

Conclusions

There is clearly a major role for teenage magazines in sexual health education. Their capacity to discuss sex frankly and openly, to raise issues relating to sexual desire and pleasure and to provide role models with whom young women can identify, is unparalleled by other agencies. Magazines are in a strong position to be able to empower women, enabling them to make effective choices and exercise control over their own lives. They can also help provide a language with which sex can be discussed and offer guidance on a 'script' for use in sexual encounters.

At the same time, the evidence suggests that the interests of young women may not be best served by perpetuating the belief that early sexual activity is the norm. The temptation to publish the results of in-house surveys is understandable, since these have an immediacy which comes from their being based on the reports of actual readers. Yet there seems to be a strong case for avoiding presenting the results as representing the behaviour of all young people, and for making available to readers more accurate estimates of behaviour at the broader level. In addition, it would be reassuring to young women to see a wider range of role models, and for magazine features to celebrate diversity rather than uniformity. All credit, however, must go to magazines for featuring articles which are designed to help young people adopt routine safer sex behaviours and exercise healthy choices in their personal lives, and every effort should be made by the appropriate agencies to assist them in continuing to do so.

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