

Condomizing in the Caribbean

The S-Concept is just one example of what's being done to address HIV in Trinidad and Tobago

by *Moira Denman*

Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) is a tropical, lush, two-island republic located in the Caribbean, just 11 kilometres off the coast of Venezuela. Anyone fortunate enough to visit T&T knows that the highlight of the year is Carnival. Residents and visitors alike look forward to this massive celebration at the end of February. People start to celebrate just after New Year's Eve in anticipation of Carnival: the music, the costumes, and two days of dancing, parading, and partying. But with all these festivities, and with thousands of visitors in attendance, it creates an environment conducive to high-risk behaviour. And that means an increased risk of HIV transmission.

The Caribbean, best known for its beaches and tropical beauty, is the second most HIV-affected region in the world, after sub-Saharan Africa. With a prevalence of 1.6 percent, there are approximately 300,000 people infected. In 2005, the AIDS epidemic claimed an estimated 24,000 lives in the Caribbean, making it the leading cause of death among adults aged 15-44 years. The HIV prevalence rate varies greatly among the Caribbean islands: Haiti has the highest rate, Cuba has the lowest, and T&T is in the middle.

Since HIV/AIDS was first diagnosed in T&T in 1983, over 15,600 cases of HIV have been reported to the National Surveillance Unit of the Ministry of Health. Almost three-quarters of new infections occur within the age range of 15 to 49; within the 15 to 19 age group, HIV infection levels are six times higher among females. Like other countries, there are higher prevalence rates of HIV among such high-risk groups as men who have sex with men, commercial sex workers, and drug users.

The country has a National AIDS Coordinating Committee (NACC) that works out of the office of the Prime Minister and is charged with coordinating the expanded national response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Throughout the year, the NACC supports a national ABC program: abstinence, being faithful, and condom use.

Every year when Carnival rolls around, the emphasis is on

condom use, or "condomizing." Different organizations from various sectors take part in this campaign. One example of the NACC's steps to scale up prevention programs is S-Concept, an intervention that focuses on the provision of condoms and accurate information surrounding condom use. Formally known as the Condom Krew, the group is comprised of volunteers. The Condom Krew distributed over 480,000 condoms over a four-year period; in a country of just over one million people, that's a lot of condoms. Condoms are distributed mainly at

carnival parties, which are considered high-risk environments.

The information provided about accurate condom use and HIV prevention is especially important considering there are no standardized sexual education classes within the school system. The only program provided through the Ministry of Education is an abstinence program. If you grew up in a country with extensive sexual education programs in schools, you may be surprised to hear radio advertisements in T&T that

encourage people to educate themselves about HIV and advise them that home remedies such as bleach will not prevent the transmission of HIV. High levels of stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV throughout the Caribbean, as well as strong religious influences, are also ongoing challenges to prevention efforts.

If you do get the chance to experience Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago, go! Just be safe. ☺



Volunteers at the Condom Booth at an MSM party during Carnival

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