



UNSAFE SEX: Foreign students are avoiding contraception, while abortion rates soar.

The other face of freedom

ROB BRIDGMAN, REBECCA GARDINER, and LEISHA JONES investigate the alarming abortion rate among New Zealand's foreign students.

High abortion rates among international students studying in New Zealand continue to worry health officials. These students arrive in the country with little sex education and frequently rely on abortion as their primary birth control method.

Lisbeth Alley, primary health nurse at AUT Student Health, Counselling and Wellbeing, says international students are seriously lacking in sex education when they come to New Zealand.

She says in many countries sex and contraception are never talked about.

"They simply don't understand contraception," she says.

This lack of education results in a large number of students, particularly Asians, facing sexual health issues such as sexually transmitted infections and abortion.

A 2002 article in the *New Zealand Medical Journal* showed that at one abortion clinic, 55 per cent of women who underwent the procedure were of Asian descent.

Significantly, most of these patients were young Chinese women who were non-resident students.

The article showed that 80 per cent of these women claim to have been using no contraception at all during intercourse, reinforcing the serious lack of sex education among this population.

It also highlighted cultural differences among the Asian population, where sex education and attitudes are often different to traditional Western views.

In the *New Zealand Medical Journal* article Dr Felicity Goodyear-Smith says that in some Asian countries, and particularly China, abortion is actively promoted as a form of contraception and many women rely on it as their primary family planning method.

Another problem New Zealand health professionals face in addressing this issue is that many Asian women distrust other methods of contraception.

Lisbeth Alley says many students are against taking oral contraceptives because they see taking pills and hormones as "changing and poisoning" their bodies.

Alley says some students see abortions as an easy option, but explains that the procedure is often more damaging than they think. She says the aftermath of an abortion is highly significant in terms of grief and adds that many women feel a sense of loss and need support from family and friends.

This is often difficult as many students have to keep abortions secret as unplanned pregnancies are a source of great shame for women in some Asian countries.

Another issue is that many students are shocked at the freedom they are presented with upon their arrival in New Zealand, a stark contrast to the conservative environment they are used to in their home country.

Former Education Minister Trevor

Mallard confirmed this in an International Asian Health Conference in 2004. Mallard said many young Asian students arrive in New Zealand unprepared for the degree of freedom offered to them and are at a high risk of "going off the rails".

The manager of Mandarin Line and marketing manager of the International Students Service, Marie Lu, agrees and says "New Zealand is a very free country".

"They've suddenly got everything: girlfriend, boyfriend, a nice house, lovely car.

"It's too much at once. That's where the problem starts."

International student and former employee of Mandarin Line, Macy Xu, says many students feel homesick and lonely away from their families.

She says they are curious about sex because of the lack of sex education in their home country, and are inclined to experiment in the free environment of New Zealand.

But with their lack of contraceptive knowledge, students have unprotected sex, risking pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

Alley believes sexual health messages are not getting through to international students because many feel these problems will not affect them and they see themselves as infallible.

Marie Lu says language difficulties are also a problem in educating students about sex. She says many Asian students avoid going to English-speaking doctors and, in the event of an unwanted pregnancy, will even opt for a dangerous home abortion rather than visit a clinic.

Macy Xu agrees and says many Asian students feel uncomfortable talking about sexual issues including contraception and pregnancy.

In particular, she says young Asian women are often unwilling to talk to an English-speaking stranger about these problems and so will often turn to their friends for advice.

Alley says the university's insurance policy for international students has a free health consultation so students can learn about sexual health and ask any questions they have upon arrival in New Zealand.

However, this is rarely taken up by students, she says.

According to a *New Zealand Medical Journal* report, many students are wary of oral contraceptives but will also often decline free samples of condoms as they believe it is up to the man to provide birth control.

Judy Simpson, senior advisor of international education at the Ministry of Education, says there is no specific sex education programme in place for tertiary institutes.

She says that under the code of practice for pastoral care of international students universities are required to provide information on sexual health.

But how they do so is up to them.

"It is the responsibility of each insti-

tute to provide the best service they can with the resources they have available."

She says most universities do so using CD-ROMS and videos and Family Planning is also extensively involved.

Although Family Planning has sexual health brochures available in Chinese, it appears that a more effective method of getting the message across is needed.

Marie Lu says her organisation actively visits language schools around Auckland to provide presentations on sex education.

The organisation also provides health workshops for men and women with information on preventing pregnancy and protecting themselves from sexually transmitted infections.

Lu says both the International Students Service and Mandarin Line are aware of the large number of unwanted pregnancies among Asian students in New Zealand and says that staff do their best to help young women in this situation by referring them to Family Planning.

"We try to help them as much as possible.

"We just tell them 'don't be panicked. We will try to help you. Everything can be sorted out'," says Lu.

High abortion rates among Asian students is an on-going problem in New Zealand and various attempts to address this issue have been made in the past.

In an article from the *Nelson Mail* in February, Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology campus nurse Alison Horn said she was concerned about the increasing rates of unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections among tertiary students — many of whom were Asian.

The institute has subsequently introduced *Sex Smart*, a sex education CD-ROM to some of the campus's computers.

Another education provider, Massey University, has had similar problems. A *Manawatu Standard* report in 2005 suggested that international students at Massey University account for almost half of student abortions, despite being only 20 per cent of the university population.

The article stated that a representative from the university's student health said he spoke to students about sexual health at orientation, but said his words didn't get through.

The article reinforced the notion that many Asian women aren't as assertive as New Zealand women in insisting that some form of contraception be used.

This was represented in the increase of international students having abortions, with a jump from 32 per cent in 2003 to 57 per cent in 2004.

Dr Goodyear-Smith suggested in the *Medical Journal* that there needs to be active co-operation between policy-makers and health workers to provide better sex education. This could work to reduce the numbers of young Asian women having abortions.

"Liaison should be established between

the primary health care sector and policy makers of immigration and other services that assist overseas students to develop and provide culturally appropriate education for this population."

Judy Chen, health promotion practitioner for the Auckland Regional Health Service, also says there needs to be a co-ordination of Government services, such as the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Immigration and district health boards to develop a sexual health programme for international students.

However, she says that unfortunately any available funding is aimed at supporting residents rather than immigrants.

"There needs to be some kind of policy from above.

"We can't just bring students here; we need to create a healthy environment for them."

In his Auckland University speech, then Education Minister Trevor Mallard said some solutions were needed to improve the health of Asian students in New Zealand.

"It is vital policy makers work together with officials in other Government departments, with researchers, and with the community to ensure solutions are appropriate."

However, Alley believes it is possible to change these attitudes.

"It just takes one effective event to make a change," she says.

Alley says all the sexual health tools needed are available but not all students take advantage of the resources.

"Unfortunately you just can't force people to read them."

Student Health provides an education

"We can't just bring students here; we need to create a healthy environment for them."

"They've suddenly got everything: girlfriend, boyfriend, a nice house, lovely car. It's too much at once."



SEX-ED: AUT nurse Lisbeth Alley

evening for all students living in Wellesley apartments."

However, Alley says, when it comes to the sexual health part of the evening, "many do a runner".

She also says there is no budget for health care but Student Health places educational material in student magazine *Debate* as often as possible.

Student Health is currently in the process of creating a health promotion website that will be attached to the AUT website in the hope of educating more students via the internet.

PHOTO: REBECCA GARDINER

PHOTO: REBECCA GARDINER