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Spectrum

Warning: Purchasing condoms can be hazardous to your health

By Matt Kleinerman

A few weeks ago, my father told me this joke: What's the difference between the 50s and today?

Answer: In the 50s, men walked into drug stores and said, "I'll take a pack of cigarettes and (whispering) *a box of condoms.*" Now they say, "I'll take a box of condoms and (whispering) *a pack of cigarettes.*"

This joke clearly illustrates an important social phenomenon, other than that my father still has a better sense of humor than I do. It shows that some jokes simply do not translate well to paper, and are better left to the spoken word.

In addition, this bit of prophylactic whimsy shows the extent to which we have all gleefully accepted condoms into our everyday parlance. Remember when we all used to be embarrassed to say the word "condom" in public? Why, we thought up all those silly nicknames for them, like "rubbers," "jimmies" and "love stockings." Well, that last one never quite caught on, but I always thought it should have.

Now the AIDS epidemic has cured us of these insecurities, and we have no problem bringing up the word in casual conversations with friends, relatives, and clergy. Even television stations are starting to loosen up, now going as far as to show an actual advertisement for "safer sex" featuring a man putting on his socks! And we all know what *that* means, don't we?

Condoms and I go back a long way. On my resume, several lines are devoted to my ac-

tivities as a "Male Peer Sexuality Educator." This means I used to go around to fraternities and dormitories and help people talk about condoms. I would help previously inhibited men say the word over and over, do role-playing games in which we would discuss them in sexual situations, and have water-balloon fights with them.

This was a good conditioning experience for me. In fact, I myself have loosened up so much that I plan to mention the word "condom" at least once in every paragraph for the rest of this column. And as further proof of my lack of inhibitions about condoms, I will share a recent anecdote.

I and my significant other -- who I will call "Sig" -- recently ran out of condoms, and Sig reminded me that it was my turn to purchase the aforementioned love stockings. After all, even though we have remained monogamous for three years now, Sig's sexual history includes several incidents too sordid to be mentioned here. I will save them for another time.

Walking towards the store, I reminisced on my days as a sexuality educator -- and as my face and extremities began to heat up and redden, I remembered exactly how mortified I was to say, uh, that word repeatedly in front of large crowds. Striding confidently through Pathmark, I decided to investigate several sections of the store before heading over to the, er . . . condiments.

Not wanting to bother any store employees with silly questions, I decided to find the con-

dominium section on my own. And you can't imagine where they were! They hid them all the way at the back of the store by the back register -- almost as if people would be embarrassed about buying them! How absurd!

I stood there before the attractive display rack of those things for quite some time trying to decide on a brand. So many varieties of commodes. Spermicidal or non-spermicidal? Vibra-ribbed for extra pleasure? Extra sensitive? Extra large? How many people are on line at the register?

Realizing I had now spent well nigh 10 minutes staring at the condensers, and that there simply would not come a time when I was alone at the back of the store, I stretched my right hand, quivering with excitement, toward a pretty purple box. And just then, an amazing thing happened.

No sooner had I touched the purple box when it leapt from the rack, flew almost five feet, landed squarely on the shoulder of an elderly woman (who, no doubt, had come to purchase condyles of her own), proceeded to jauntily bounce its way down the front of her torso, and came to rest innocently on the floor as if it had done nothing at all.

After giving the purple box of condolences a stern talking to, and comparing its color to that of my skin, I took my place on the queue. The checkout person announced that she was running low on bags. The nightmare began: what if they're out of bags? I'll have to carry it out in the open! or put it in my pocket! they'll

think I'm stealing! they'll call the manager! then when I explain, I'll have to fill out forms and they'll apologize and give me another box and announce it on the loudspeaker! then the elderly woman will come and testify against me for attacking her with the box!

I reached the register, paid, got a bag and walked out with the condensations -- disaster averted.

As a sexuality educator, I had to handle frequent complaints that discussing or using those latex contraptions with a new acquaintance is often an impenetrable subject. I would often use the expression, "If you know someone well enough to have sex with them, then you know them well enough to discuss sexual history and birth/disease control with them." But this mantra does not take into account the fact that in order to use conundrums, someone must purchase them.

Granted, this task can often be sticky business, but just remembering two simple things help give it more of that great natural feeling. First, remember the ultimate goal of the task at hand. And second, remember that all of those drugstore personnel and clientele staring at you fumble and talk to purple boxes probably could not care less about your purchases -- and even if they do, theirs is not to condone or condemn.

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