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Safely

By Susan Catto

A review of a book on sexual health may seem out of place in an arts supplement. Yet what could be more relevant to a college population than information on the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), the un-talked about scourge of the dormitory bedroom scene? STDs pose several threats: first, actual physical hazards ranging from discomfort to death, and second, the terror and immobilization that can result from the fear of getting STDs. Preventing the first problem is a matter of safer sex and speedy treatment. Fear, on the other hand, is best fought with information; only by demystifying STDs can we give them the attention they deserve—and nothing more. Empowering women to protect both their health and their peace of mind is the aim of “A Woman’s Guide to Sexual Health,” by Dr. Sue DeCotiis. Despite some questionable ideologies, this concise, organized paperback answers the questions most people would be too embarrassed or afraid to ask.

“A Woman’s Guide to Sexual Health” is written in a question-and-answer form that covers each disease’s transmission, symptoms, treatment and prevention. At first glance, the number of diseases indicated by the chapter headings is truly terrifying. While AIDS is the STD most

people worry about, other infections have reached epidemic proportions, and these are the ones DeCotiis discusses first. Chlamydia affects 3 to 10 million people each year and can result in infertility; condyloma (genital warts) is almost as widespread and can lead to cancer. When discussing these and other diseases, it becomes clear why DeCotiis wrote her book for women only: the diseases affect each sex differently and, in women, often have no symptoms and more dangerous effects. The symptoms men experience are also given so that women can "recognize them in a potential partner and thus avoid contracting them." It is a weakness of the book that it ignores lesbians' sexual health completely; DeCotiis assumes her female readers are heterosexual.

But back to fear. "A Woman's Guide to Sexual Health" is explicit and specific in its discussion of diseases and their symptoms. DeCotiis gives detailed physical descriptions so "You will know what to look for if you suspect you may have (an STD). You won't panic when you discover a sore (having read about traumatic lesions and remembering too-tight jeans that chafed), and you will know how serious certain lesions can be, what the treatment is, and how to get it." DeCotiis also advises routine testing for infections such as chlamydia, which may not have symptoms. She describes the tests' names and procedures, thus demystifying visits to the gynecologist and allowing women to ask for the tests they need.

Readers seeking ways to make safer sex more exciting should look elsewhere. DeCotiis condemns certain sexual practices outright, writing,

"these kinds of sexual activity can be very risky, and you should avoid them." This is misleading. There are ways to make almost any sexual act safer—with use of a latex barrier, for example—and DeCotiis would serve her readers better if she provided safer sex suggestions for high-risk (or simply unusual) practices as well as for conventional sex.

Despite its occasional conservatism, "A Woman's Guide to Sexual Health" offers information that can help women have more control over their health care. STD's are nothing to panic about; a rational, informed response to their prevention, detection and treatment is the best way to ensure a healthy and enjoyable sex life, now and in the future.

**A Woman's Guide to
Sexual Health
By Sue DeCotiis, M.D.
Pocket Books, 255 pp.. \$4.95**