

SEX CRIME

Is the Ministry guilty?

The good ship “Safe Sex” is about to hit an iceberg. IAN WISHART goes head to head with the Ministry of Health’s Chief Advisor on Population Health, DOUG LUSH, in our hardest-hitting interview, ever

INVESTIGATE: It would appear that the public health campaigns that have been going on have ignored the scientific data now pouring in that condoms will not protect against most STIs, and that the huge rise in STIs may be directly related to the promotion of condoms as a safe sex tool, when in fact they’re not safe.

LUSH: I think that’s wrong, that condoms are a very important part of protecting people from sexually transmitted diseases and have a growing importance in the prevention of STIs and HIV. I haven’t seen the particular studies you refer to, however I do know there are problems in some studies in that the reported use and continued use of condoms cannot be verified or validated that these people are using them properly or consistently, and this can lead to the spread, so there are a lot of methodological problems.

INVESTIGATE: Yeah, let’s spread that the other way though, flip that coin, and you will never be able to prove condoms *are* effective. If you’re going to say condoms are effective ‘if they’re used correctly’ how on earth would you know?

LUSH: Have you heard of the Cochrane Collaboration? They did a very vigorous assessment of all the research in an area and they very strongly support the reduction of HIV incidence from condoms. Now HIV is somewhat different from other sexually transmitted infections but the work that’s done on HIV shows that condoms are very useful in protecting people from transmission.

INVESTIGATE: I’m not going to disagree with you on HIV, I think all the medical studies are showing exactly what you’re saying. What I will say to you is that it’s the only

sexually transmitted disease that condoms will protect you against. And I will tell you that categorically.

LUSH: Well I would say that that isn’t the case. We know that gonorrhoea can be protected also by the use of condoms, and there’s good evidence of that. Other STIs like herpes, where it depends on where the herpes lesions are, there’s variable protection from condoms. But syphilis, gonorrhoea, Chlamydia – there’s good protection from condoms and I’m very comfortable with the approach we’ve used in New Zealand, “No Rubba No Hubba Hubba”. We know that teenagers are sexually active and this is a way that they can protect themselves from STIs. It’s not a foolproof way but it certainly does reduce the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases.

INVESTIGATE: What sort of level of protection would you expect a condom to give against Chlamydia, gonorrhoea or syphilis?

LUSH: If they’re used consistently and regularly, then a very good rate of protection.

INVESTIGATE: How would you define that, percentage wise, allowing for the fact that three percent of condoms will result in pregnancy, so that’s the ultimate sort of failure rate.

LUSH: I know studies have shown the failure rate is between two and eighteen percent in condom use. The physical characteristics of the condom suggest that we know the agents that cause STIs don’t pass through the condom, so if a condom is used correctly there won’t be any transmission.

INVESTIGATE: How would you feel if I told you the scientific evidence over the past five years is showing that, for example, that there may only be a reduction in Chlamydia

“Looking at the site, we have a question “Why aren’t you promoting abstinence?” which is a question we are often asked. And I’ll read out the response: “The campaign is about supporting choices made by teens, whether that is to have sex or wait. Those who are sexually active need protection to reduce the risk of STIs”

rates of 26% against those who don’t use condoms at all. Those who are consistently and always using condoms according to the WHO’s meta-analysis are still likely to suffer a 74% rate of infection. Would that surprise you?

LUSH: That would, and I’d be interested in looking at their methodology as to how they validated this.

INVESTIGATE: This was a study of 917 sex workers in Peru, published in the *Journal of Sexually Transmitted Diseases*. But even in the best studies the WHO’s meta-analysis has pulled together, the Chlamydia reduction rate is only 40%, so you’re still talking worse odds than Russian Roulette.

LUSH: A 40% reduction is a useful reduction and I would see that as a worst case scenario [not the best case].

INVESTIGATE: It’s useful in the sense of looking at the overall population demographic, it’s not so useful if little Johnny or Mary goes out, reading the posters saying condoms are “safe sex”, and that’s the basic message. Up to 25% of young people in some Northland towns have Chlamydia, so that’s pretty good odds of catching it over time.

LUSH: It is a population approach, but it also is personal protection. And it is valid advice for someone who is sexually active that they should use a condom. The frequency of activity that prostitutes are involved in is very different from adolescents in NZ, as far as frequency of sexual contact. Although there may be some who are very sexually promiscuous, this isn’t the norm and you can’t really apply those studies to the type of protection you’re going to get from condoms.

INVESTIGATE: I’ll take you through some of these studies because they are fasci-

nating, and they’re the only evidence that the medical world actually has. A study of 380 American girls aged 14 to 18, revealed that 30% of the girls who didn’t use condoms had caught a sexually transmitted disease by the end of six months, and 17.8% of girls who always used condoms also had caught STDs at the end of that period.

LUSH: This is reported condom use, and we see a very dramatic decrease.

INVESTIGATE: Well you do, and you don’t. At a population level you see a decrease in the percentage, but at a personal level you’ve got a bunch of kids out there who are putting condoms on because the health authorities are telling them “safe sex – wear a condom”, and the truth is they’re not being told that “in actual fact you’ve still got a very high risk you’re going to catch something”.

LUSH: Our message to the youth of NZ, or sexually active people, is that if you want to avoid sexually transmitted infections, then the sure way is not to have sex. However...

INVESTIGATE: Where do you say that?!

LUSH: ... accepting the reality that young people do have sex and they want to protect themselves, using a condom is the best way.

INVESTIGATE: Well, are you telling young people though? Because I’ve looked across the Hubba site and I’ll be frank – that site is grossly inaccurate. Even on the Q&A section, “Are condoms safe?”, the site arrogantly is suggesting – it lists the STIs “Chlamydia, gonorrhoea, herpes, genital warts” etc – and says “people say these things can get through, but they can’t, it’s safe”. That’s what they’re saying, and it’s a crock! There are something like 40 studies that the World Health Organisation has cited in its *Bulletin*, which

ironically the Ministry of Health referred me to.

LUSH: Looking at the site, we have a question “Why aren’t you promoting abstinence?” which is a question we are often asked. And I’ll read out the response: “The campaign is about supporting choices made by teens, whether that is to have sex or wait. Those who are sexually active need protection to reduce the risk of STIs. Unfortunately many young people don’t plan their first sexual experience, and this campaign aims to help young people think realistically and be ready to protect themselves.”

INVESTIGATE: OK, if this campaign is about making young people think realistically, where is the evidence on your website that you are telling them there is still, for example, an 80% chance they’re going to get syphilis?

LUSH: There isn’t an 80% chance of getting syphilis from a single sexual encounter.

INVESTIGATE: Well how many kids are having single encounters and how do we know? This gets back to my question at the start which we don’t have an answer to: You do query, and rightly so, that we don’t know how well people are using the condoms, or whether they’re really using them or whether they’re just saying so to please the researcher. But the flip side of that coin is that the health authorities are making the point that a condom properly used will prevent this. But you’ve got no scientific evidence to back that up either, for exactly the same reason – because you can’t get a control group that you can actually prove are doing it right.

LUSH: Fortunately we know the way a condom works. It is a direct barrier between the semen and the vagina.



INVESTIGATE: Yeah, it's great for preventing pregnancy, but according to the studies it's no good at protecting against most STIs.

LUSH: Problems occur both with the validity of reporting and the behavioural aspects. It is hard to conduct because the intimate nature of the activity you're investigating means you can't actually watch what's happening, so you just have to assume people are telling the truth.

INVESTIGATE: Exactly! But Doug, here's my point...

LUSH: The point of our campaign is that we go into a great lot of detail about the need for people to know how to use condoms properly, and even to practice using condoms, so for young men we would advise them to practice by themselves using condoms, so that when it comes to their first sexual experience they know how to do them, so it's important not just to use them but to know how to use them.

INVESTIGATE: I'm going to come back to this question time and time again: how do you know that using a condom the way the Health Ministry recommends will actually achieve the result? I'll tell you why you don't know – there isn't one scientific study in the world that shows it, because there is no control group that you can monitor 24/7 to see whether they're doing it correctly or not. There has not been a study like that, therefore you cannot make the claim that "if you do it right it will protect you". You have no scientific basis for making that claim!

LUSH: We have extremely strong support for HIV from these meta-analyses that were done.

INVESTIGATE: Yeah, but as you've acknowledged, and I agree, HIV is contained within the semen, effectively, and is therefore trapped by the condom as part of the condom's design to prevent pregnancy. These other diseases are not constructed in such ways, and according to the WHO, according to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, according to the *British Medical Journal*, and so on and so on and so on, these diseases are getting through.

Yeah, sure, you can sit there and say "well, we don't know how well they're using the condoms or whether they're really reporting them", but the flip side of the coin is, you have no proof that using a condom correctly is going to work anyway, because that scientific study hasn't been done either.

LUSH: The studies that you've told me about that you say discredit the value of condoms still have significant differences between those who're using condoms and those who don't. So on that evidence alone it would be

worthwhile to suggest using condoms and promoting condom usage.

INVESTIGATE: Well, let's take it through a little bit. I'll start with the World Health Organisation *Bulletin* of June 2004. Quote: "No published prospective study has found protection against genital human papilloma virus (ie, cervical cancer, warts, HPV) infection".

LUSH: Does it say that?

INVESTIGATE: It does say that.

LUSH: Is that what it reports?

INVESTIGATE: I will read you the exact quote: "No published prospective study has found protection against genital human papilloma virus HPV infection".

LUSH: And this is in?

INVESTIGATE: This is WHO's *Bulletin* June 04. It's in the abstract. I've got a couple of others here. *AIDS Journal* 2001, a study of 17,264 adults in the town of Rakai, Uganda, over four years measured STD infection rates. Consistent condom use resulted in only a 29% reduction in syphilis infections as against the general population, and a 50% reduction in Chlamydia and gonorrhoea.

The *Journal of Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, 2002, a meta-analysis of 20 studies found, quote: "found no evidence that condoms were effective against genital HPV infection, warts or cervical cancer." Again, that contrasts directly with what's on the Hubba site.

LUSH: And the Hubba site is saying? I can't see the part where you say we mention the wart virus. I'm looking here and it says

"condoms do work, used correctly and consistently". And they're the key points.

INVESTIGATE: Definition of STIs: "Chlamydia, genital warts, herpes or gonorrhoea". Then you've got a question, "How can I protect myself against STIs?". Answer, "Use condoms. Correctly used, and used every time you have sex, condoms are the most effective protection against most STIs including HIV/AIDS". So you do mention genital warts in there.

LUSH: Well I do agree with that statement, that condoms are the most effective method of protection we know of. There aren't any other effective ways of doing this.

INVESTIGATE: I'm not suggesting that the Health Ministry simply throws up its hands in horror and says "OK, no sex", albeit that there are those who say it's a good idea. I appreciate that you're not going to get that message through to teenagers, but certainly fluffing around and ignoring the reality that condoms won't protect – I mean, let's get real! Condoms will not protect people against STIs. Parents out there are thinking the sex education methods are working. You've got the front page stories in the papers that are nothing but inaccurate propaganda. It's literally interwoven with all your publicity and has been for a long time. Is it not time that we admitted the Emperor has no clothes, and began investigating a different strategy for young people, because there's nothing on your website to suggest there's a risk at all?





LUSH: I think it [the website] implies that you need to be experienced and consistent in your use.

INVESTIGATE: I'll take you to another one. *American Journal of Epidemiology* 2003, a study of 444 female university students in the States found that "consistently using condoms with a new partner is not associated with significant protection against HPV".

LUSH: Yes, but that's not an area that we dwell on in the publicity, we're mainly talk about Chlamydia.

INVESTIGATE: If you have got a partner who may have slept around, may have a disease, really, don't rely on a condom at all. Insist on a screening check because there is a very real chance that even if you use a condom, you're going to catch it. You're not saying that, but that's what you need to say.

Is it time to say, "Condoms don't work except for pregnancy or HIV. Don't rely on them for any other protection". Isn't that a better way of giving kids the right choices to make?

LUSH: No I don't believe so at all!

INVESTIGATE: Why?

LUSH: Because condoms are effective.

INVESTIGATE: Against what!? With respect, what are they effective against?

LUSH: Syphilis.

INVESTIGATE: No they're not. The best study that the WHO meta-analysis found shows a reduction of 29% in syphilis rates, still a 71% chance of contracting syphilis, so you can throw that one out the window.

LUSH: But again, the methodology in a lot of these is...

INVESTIGATE: You still have no scientific evidence to make the claim that a condom, correctly used, will protect you, because as you point out no one has done the 24/7, hidden camera, monitored installation of people having sex. So you can't make that comment hand on heart, and your comment about the studies possibly not reflecting proper condom use is irrelevant, because if you don't know that condoms actually work – even in ideal conditions – then how can you criticize these studies? That's just fobbing it off.

LUSH: I will be a bit repetitive here. We do know that the viruses and bacteria that cause STIs do not pass through.

INVESTIGATE: You know from a lab test...

LUSH: We know that if that physical barrier is in place these infections won't be passed from person to person. We know from the best studies which have been undertaken in people with HIV that there is an 80% reduction. So we know that condoms will also work for other sexually transmitted infections.

INVESTIGATE: Such as?

LUSH: We have some modest results from the literature, but the methodological problems with reporting and the competence in using condoms means we need to interpret these results carefully.

INVESTIGATE: Doug, you're not listening to me, with respect. You're repeating the same thing.

LUSH: I told you I'd repeat the same thing. That's my line and that's where we're at with this.

INVESTIGATE: But you cannot make this claim. You can't. You have no proof that a correctly-used condom, in the wild, will protect you. The results you have about viruses and bacteria not passing through the latex are lab tests in ideal conditions. But a human body is not an ideal condition. And you don't know, and I don't know, where in fact the bacteria from some of these things actually are on the person, or how easily transferable they are. That may be why the condoms are failing – not because people aren't using them correctly but just because condoms will not actually work in that situation. And you can't point to a piece of research that shows I'm wrong on that.

LUSH: I'm not underestimating the complexity in the technique, but there are technical aspects to this.

INVESTIGATE: You don't have one single scientific study about using a condom correctly.

LUSH: We have extremely good studies.

INVESTIGATE: Name one. I have a suspicion after reading the WHO *Bulletin* that one has never been done.

LUSH: I'll refer you to the Cochrane Collaboration on condom use, which shows an 80% reduction in HIV incidence.

INVESTIGATE: But I agree with you on that. We've talked about HIV. You're not tackling the central issue. Before you can get up and slag off these studies by saying people may be misreporting their condom use, you have to be able to prove the claim that the Ministry of Health repeatedly makes, that a correctly used condom will protect you. Where's the proof?

LUSH: A lot of it comes through inference, and a lot of it comes through studies that do show a reduction in transmission.

INVESTIGATE: What studies? The ones I'm showing you are not showing a significant reduction in transmission. You've still got, at best, a one in two chance of catching something. That's worse odds than Russian Roulette, significantly worse odds.

LUSH: We'll stick with the Cochrane Collaboration and the results for HIV where there has been attention to the methodology. I'd venture to say the methodology on the other ones is problematic.

INVESTIGATE: Obviously we're going to be at loggerheads on this one. Is there any plan, on the basis of what I've revealed to you, to review the way the "safe sex" message is publicized in New Zealand, do you accept that the current publicity is flawed?

LUSH: No, I don't.



“Abstinence is something that needs to be considered and that is an option that young people may wish to explore. However there are sexually active people and the best way of protecting themselves is condoms”

INVESTIGATE: Do you accept that it could be potentially flawed?

LUSH: I acknowledge that we need to watch what is in the literature and that abstinence is the most risk averse – for the most risk averse, abstinence is something that people might want to consider.

INVESTIGATE: What about on your websites and in all your literature, why are you not incorporating the studies that have been around for five years now – and these are the only studies you’ve got to work with because they’re the only studies in the world – that are revealing significant – up to a 100% chance – risks of catching STIs regardless of using a condom. Why is this not on your website, why are teenagers not being told in school, and will you rectify that?

LUSH: Teenagers. The aim is to protect

teenagers who are having their first, or infrequent, sexual encounters. We know that the people they’re having sex with may well have an STI. There isn’t good information on the protection per single episode, but we believe it would give a good level of protection for each single episode, and combined with reporting and treatment of STIs, this is a useful way to protect individuals and the population by reducing rates.

INVESTIGATE: Well I’ve quoted you two studies following teenagers over six months, and even those who consistently used condoms, and in some cases almost exactly the same number of condom-users caught sexually transmitted diseases as those who didn’t use condoms. So we’re going to be saying the “No Rubba, No Hubba” campaign is an absolute fraud. If you guys don’t put this information in there, how can anyone trust what the Ministry of Health says?

LUSH: I don’t have anything to reply to that, except to say that I’m certainly comfortable with Hubba.

INVESTIGATE: But how can you be comfortable with it, in the face of 40-odd studies quoted by the WHO? How can you look at those studies and tell me that there’s nothing you have to do to Hubba and everything on your website is OK, when I’ve just proven scientifically that it’s a crock.?

LUSH: I don’t think you have proven that.

INVESTIGATE: We’ve had this discus-

sion. You have no studies to back up your claim. You can make the claim for HIV and that’s all you can make it for.

LUSH: You’ve raised a number of studies that show a low level of protection or no protection. There are problems, as we know, in the methodology of doing this. We know that what we see in HIV is generalisable. We know the physical characteristics of the condom.

INVESTIGATE: But that relates to pregnancy and semen. It doesn’t relate to herpes or HPV, or syphilis, Chlamydia and so forth. Those are different organisms. You are trying to extrapolate something which is specific to condom design – i.e., stopping semen from going through, and you’re trying to extrapolate that out to venereal disease generally and you can’t, there’s not one study in the world that shows this.

LUSH: Still, on herpes, I did mention that herpes can occur when condoms are used.

INVESTIGATE: The studies show that at best there will be a 40% reduction in herpes infection rates if a condom is always and consistently used.

LUSH: That’s a spectacular result.

INVESTIGATE: It’s a spectacular result at a population level ...

LUSH: ... and at an individual level as well.

INVESTIGATE: Not if the individual hasn’t been told. It’s only spectacular if the individual knows before slapping a condom on that there’s still a 60% chance they’ll catch herpes if they sleep with someone who’s affected over a period of time. And you’re not telling them that.

LUSH: You shouldn’t have sexual activity if you have lesions.

INVESTIGATE: But there’s nothing on your website, nothing, that gives people any advice of the risks. I’ll turn this around. You guys are going after the makers of vitamin supplements, for heaven’s sake, and dietary supplements, and saying that because there is a slight risk that somebody may be misled that these things should all be tightly regulated, and here you are promoting the biggest load of old codswallop I’ve ever seen. It doesn’t stack up against the scientific evidence. You’re not prepared to make changes to your website or the way you do it. You are holding onto irrelevant studies to try and justify your position – if the Ministry was in private practice it’d be sued!

LUSH: I have no response to that.

INVESTIGATE: No, and with respect I’m not trying to get at you. But in general terms the Ministry of Health would be down on a private operator like a ton of bricks, as they are, and here’s the MoH refusing, refusing to tell young people the real truth about condoms and the risks. Nowhere on your website

or your material is that point raised, and you're saying "we're not going to change it", and I'm saying to you the best scientific evidence in the world says what you're saying is a crock. You've got no response to that apart from an HIV study that's irrelevant, and I think you guys are on dangerous ground. That's my personal opinion.

LUSH: Yep, I'm hearing you.

INVESTIGATE: So I'll ask the question again: Are you prepared to start giving much more information about the failures of condoms based on the scientific evidence to date, so that people can make informed decisions for themselves? You say abstinence doesn't work, but if people knew that every time they had sex there was a real 50% chance of their penis dropping off, do you think the abstinence rates would actually grow? I think they would. So abstinence can't be taken in isolation. Abstinence is relevant to the amount of information and risk that is out there.

For the past 20 years we've been sold a safe sex message that says if you use a condom you're protected.

LUSH: I don't believe we've said that. We've said that if people are going to make a choice to be sexually active, then they can get a level of protection by using condoms. We've never said this is absolute, but we believe it is good protection they can get with consistent and proper use.

INVESTIGATE: Yeah, but your definition of good protection at the start of this interview was between two and 18% failure [a 98% - 82% protection], now there's not one study in the world that shows you'll get that level of protection from a condom with these diseases at all. Best case scenario, 50% protection, worst case zero protection.

LUSH: I'm talking about the condom failure rate. That is thought to be the way transmission can occur.

INVESTIGATE: Yes, but what I'm saying to you is that real tests in the real world are showing the transmission rate is much higher. There is a very good chance that our current sexual disease explosion is *directly* a result of the safe sex campaign, because people are not being told the full story about the risks and failures. And it seems you're not even aware of the failures in the Ministry.

I find it staggering. I don't know how many kids have got a disease now that's making them potentially infertile, and certainly giving them health issues, because we haven't faced up to this. And how many women die of cervical cancer, because of this?

LUSH: The Ministry is quite clear on screening policy for cervical cancer.

INVESTIGATE: Yes, but screening is after the fact. You're not giving people a choice *before* they endanger themselves. In fact the material on the Hubba site says condoms will protect you from genital warts. Your information is grossly inaccurate and possibly dangerous.

LUSH: I don't believe that any of the information is dangerous. I do agree with you that abstinence is something that needs to be considered and that is an option that young people may wish to explore. However there are sexually active people and the best way of protecting themselves is condoms. We're confident of that and we've had an expert group who have advised us on this.

INVESTIGATE: Well you'd better be going back to those experts and ask "why didn't you tell us this?". There is no study in the world that is giving people the confidence that you believe exists. And I can't believe that an NZ taxpayer-funded Ministry of Health, with the responsibilities that the Ministry has for public safety, can justify the stand that it is currently taking as if the iceberg is not in front of you. It's there all right.

LUSH: The iceberg is what?

INVESTIGATE: The iceberg is the cold hard reality that condoms don't work, and we've got a generation of kids now who've caught STDs because they believed the lie.

LUSH: I think the kids who've caught the STDs are ones who haven't used condoms or haven't used them in a way that's allowed them to protect themselves.

INVESTIGATE: Well, the international studies are showing that up to 100% of those using condoms correctly are still catching STDs. So again, you have no scientific basis for your anecdotal claim.

LUSH: That points to the problems they have in using them and using them consistently.

INVESTIGATE: And again, name me one scientific study that supports what you are claiming.

LUSH: I'll take you back to the Cochrane study on HIV.

INVESTIGATE: But you've got the WHO meta-analysis in front of you. It's telling you something you don't want to hear, and so you're ignoring it.

LUSH: We're going over the same territory now. We think condoms provide good protection from sexually transmitted diseases.

INVESTIGATE: How good is "good"?

LUSH: This is a difficult thing. Looking at what's happened in HIV, we'd say an 80% reduction in risk.

INVESTIGATE: So you'd say there's only a 20% risk when they use a condom with someone else who's infected, of catching it, and that's despite every single study I've taken you through today?

LUSH: I would have thought [the protection] was bigger than that. Obviously evidence in this area is difficult to come by.

INVESTIGATE: Doug Lush, Ministry of Health, appreciate your time.

As this issue was going to press, Doug Lush sent a letter to Investigate to further clarify the Ministry's position. He urged the magazine to take cognizance of the fact that despite the bleak data in the studies, the World Health Organisation was still urging countries not to give up on condoms because they are effective at cutting population rates of STDs. The WHO also noted that more studies are needed on the subject.

With respect to the WHO, we disagree. While one medical study could be treated as a rogue result, the medical journals are publishing study after study reaching the same conclusion. No study is showing any result backing up the fairy story that "a condom, properly used" will pre-

vent STDs. While Investigate accepts that condoms certainly have a role in preventing HIV, and possibly other diseases at a population level, our major issue is one of informed consent. Currently, there are no warnings in sex education publicity material that reflect the grave failings in regard to condoms and STDs. It is only appropriate for condoms to continue being promoted if, and only if, the public is given the real facts about the disease transmission rates through condoms. If the public is not given the information from the dozens of medical studies published so far, then the Ministry is effectively conducting a new Unfortunate Experiment, only this time it affects hundreds of thousands of New Zea-

landers, their health, their fertility and possibly even their lives.

As we said in the interview, people may change their sexual behaviours if they believe there is a real risk to themselves, despite the use of a condom. Of course, others won't change. But that should be the public's choice, based on their right to know, not secret information hidden away because the Ministry of Health and Family Planning Association don't want to upset their own publicity schemes.

This is a national disgrace, and the Ministry of Health's continued denial of the only hard evidence in the world is an absolute scandal.

Ian Wishart, Editor

