EM9022: Toronto Star, February 10, 1990, page G3

Condom quality is a concern for officials

The federal government has expressed some concern about recent lab test results showing a leading brand of condoms sold in post-secondary schools performed poorly.

Because it was such a small sample – 10 to 15 of each of five brands – it's possible that only this particular lot of the Protex condoms was faulty, said Philip Neufeld, head of the standards and testing section at Health and Welfare Canada.

"It is just luck of the draw, he said in a telephone interview responding to the results of Star-commissioned laboratory tests. "The whole thing is based on statistics and probability."

However, John Riou of the federal health protection branch of Health and Welfare Canada said, "We are more than anxious to have that test data."

The federal government is concerned about the quality of *all* condoms sold in Canada as more people rely on the birth control device for protection against acquired immune deficiency syndrome, Riou said.

Officials have stepped up enforcement of federal standards and are expected to release the latest test results of every brand available on the market some time next month.

The last time the government tested, in 1987, there was a 40 per cent failure rate. At that time, Riou said, it was obvious work needed to be done to get the industry up to standards.

Meanwhile, the Canadian distributor and the U.S. supplier of Protex condoms – some of which leaked and failed the federal government's bursting and size requirements when tested by Retail Research Laboratories – say the tests performed were on too small a scale to make any conclusons about the quality of their brand.

Heinz Bolender, president of HYCO Products Ltd., which distributes the Protex condoms in Canada, said in a telephone interview that he's surprised and skeptical. The fact that the lab testers happened to get faulty condoms was "just like winning the lottery," he said.

However, Connie Clement, family planning program co-ordinato with the City of Toronto, said: "That's no justification. *Every* batch that's out there is supposed to meet government standards."

Old samples

Bolender said the samples tested may have failed because they were old and in a bad location.

"It looks like there was an oversight somewhere down the line," he said. "Possibly, someone wasn't keeping the supply up to date."

Very few condoms sell from that vending machine because it's in the women's washroom, he said.

"'You've got to think: These things have been for three years rolled up ..... once they're unrolled you can see the rippling ..... then all of a sudden they're under instant pressure. If you tested a fresh product right out of the batch you might not have any problems."

The expiry date listed on the Protex packages was Sept. 9, 1992. Two other brands were older and the testers found no quality difference among the aged condoms. Stored properly, condoms should last up to five years, experts say.

Sam Dlugatch, executive vice-president of Allercare-Nsl, which supplies HYCO with Protex, said the failures could be due to the heat in the Ryerson washroom where the condoms were purchased. Condoms should be stored in a cool, dry place.

Vending machine

After hearing the results of the test, Bolender said he investigated further and discovered the vending machine from which the tested condoms were purchased was attached to the wall between two hand-dryers. He said he will move it.

"For all the business we're doing, all the condoms that have been bought so far, all these years, there's been only one or two complaints that I've been aware of," he said.

But Sue Johansen, a sex educator and broadcaster, said she questions Protex's reliability. Johansen, whose Sunday night sex talk show on Q107 is sponsored by Julius Schmid Canada Ltd., which produces Ramses Sensitol and other condoms, said she used a few Protex from the machine at a community college as part of a demonstration on condom strength. She stretched her hand inside the condom. Usually, the condom survives, but in this case, her hand broke through. She said she purchased several more Protex and every one broke.

Ryerson Polytechnical Institute, where the tested condoms were purchased, has had the Protex machines in a men's washroom and a women's washroom since the beginning of the school year. They are there on a trial basis; the school will decide this spring whether to continue, change or expand the service. As assurance the condoms work, Ryerson stipulated in the contract with HYCO that the Protex condoms meet federal government requirements.

Top runner

"Even though the condom has been approved (by the government), we know every so often they don't meet the specs and we're really worried about that," said Viggo Jensen, director of institute services. "We're not experts down here on a thing like that."

Protex is used in vending machines on the U of T campus – some of the buildings have had machines for 20 years. Now the university is planning to expand the service.

Jim Delaney, student affairs liaison officer, said Protex was one of a very few brands available in the boxed format compatible with vending machines. He said he has heard no complaints.

Protex is one of the top runners vying for a spot in vending machines in Toronto high schools, said Jim Garrington, chief buyer for the Toronto school board.

The board is expected to decide next month which brand to approve; the successful candidate must have the blessing of the Toronto public health department and the federal government, Garrington said.

School boards

The machines are expected to be installed in April.

Garrington said he has been getting calls from school boards all over Canada that are considering installing machines and want to see Toronto's data once trustees have decided.

The federal government is in the midst of a survey of all brands available on the market. The results will be released in March, Riou said.

The condom market has heated up since the AIDS scare.

Sales are 50 per cent higher since it became publicized that condoms can help prevent the disease, said Murray Black, president of Julius Schmid Canada Ltd.

New brands have flooded the market in recent years, he said. They usually don't last, Black said, when they collide with tough government standards.

All the brands tested for The Star are considered leading brands of condoms, manufactured by established companies.

Though there seems to be a smorgasbord of condom varieties out there, Dr. John Robertson said the number of fly-by-night importers seems to have decreased.

Robertson, of Technitrol-Eco, a contract laboratory that has tested many condoms, said: "There was a time when it was obvious condoms were going to be important and people discovered you could buy them from the Orient quite cheaply. But some of those condoms weren't very good."

Clement said she is most concerned about condoms made in Thailand and Korea, where there is no quality control.

(*continued overleaf*)

Riou said the federal government keeps an "import watch": when new brands come through customs, officials ask manufacturers for information about the production to ensure the condoms are up to Canadian standards. If that's not available, they do the analysis themselves. The federal government is also advised of U.S. tests and does periodic tests at the retail level.

Studies have shown that not all condoms work equally well and may vary with different tests.

Consumer Reports tested 40 varieties of condoms and found a projected failure rate of more than 10 per cent in some brands. However, Protex varieties ranked somewhere in the middle.

Popular brands

UCLA researchers found the AIDS virus leaked in one of 10 condoms tested in each of three popular national brands (LifeStyles Conture, Trojan Naturalube and Trojan Ribbed) and in six of 25 tested in a fourth brand (Contracept Plus). Those 25 apparently came from a batch that had deteriorated during storage. An industry spokesman said all condoms met federal requirements.

Robertson said it may be time for the Canadian government to look at condom testing more seriously, possibly checking all new brands before they come on the market.

But most experts agree the condom is much more reliable than in the past.

Ed Jackson, director of education with the AIDS Committee of Toronto, said he's impressed with Health and Welfare Canada's attempts to keep tabs on the market.

"AIDS has finally jolted them into doing the tests much more frequently and stringently. I think they're safer than they've ever been."

"No one can guarantee 100 per cent safety with condoms, but overall they're your best bet."

Some advice

Most experts said the main reason condoms break is because of misuse. They offer this advice:

- Choose latex instead of lambskin for the best protection against AIDS.
- Store condoms in a dark, cool, dry lace.
- Open packages gently; watch fingernails don't tear.
- Leave space at the end of the condom and squeeze air from the tip.
- Avoid oil-based lubricants such as Crisco, Vaseline or baby oil. Check the label to ensure a lubricant is water-based.
- Withdraw immediately after ejaculation while holding on to top of condom.

– K.Z.

The article EM9022 reprinted overleaf and above is used in Figure 11.7b of the STAT 221 Course Materials.