Condom Lockup

Condoms can prevent HIV, a virus that disproportionately affects African Americans. So why are drug stores in black neighborhoods keeping condoms locked up?

October 1, 2009 By Trent Straube

Condoms made headlines gain this summer when CVS, one of the nation's leading drug store chains, was criticized for keeping the prophylactics under lock and key, forcing shoppers in certain locations to ask for customer assistance, thus creating a barrier to easy access. CVS was accused of being three times more likely to lock up condoms in neighborhoods of color.

The charges stemmed from a campaign titled "Cure CVS," launched by Change to Win, a federation of labor unions. A campaign petition asked the pharmacy giant to adopt a nationwide policy of not locking up condoms. To date, more than 200 groups—including health care advocates, black churches and AIDS service organizations—have signed on.

It's a well-documented fact that condoms help stem sexually transmitted infections (including HIV) and unwanted pregnancies. "Cure CVS" underscores the connection between condom access and the escalating AIDS epidemic among African Americans. Its petition notes that "HIV/AIDS is the No. 1 killer of black American women between 25 and 34" and that "nearly half—46 percent—of black gay and bisexual men are believed to already be infected."

"CVS is creating barriers to products that can help save lives—and that's inexcusable," says Gina Bowers, spokesperson for Change to Win.

Juli Grigsby, who works with Black Women for Wellness, a Los Angeles group that signed the petition, points out that minority youth are especially vulnerable to the stigma and shame associated with buying a condom because mainstream media depict them as hypersexual, prone to theft and as "babies having babies." "When you are trying not to be that, it's hard to ask somebody for condoms because there's an idea of judgment coming down on you," Grigsby says.

"Our particular concern with CVS," she adds, "is that it has bought out several smaller chains, so if they're locking up condoms, it shrinks the availability."

CVS director of public relations Mike DeAngelis explained the company's current policy to *POZ* via e-mail: "In stores where condoms have been heavily shoplifted, a selection of condoms may be kept in a locked display.... This decision is based on the theft experience of the store, not its

specific location. In stores that have a locked condom display, however, we maintain a selection of condoms that are not locked and are available for customers to purchase without asking for assistance from store employees." (DeAngelis also counters that Change to Win's true goal is to boost union membership, not protect consumers.)

Doesn't a corporation have a right to protect its inventory from "shrinkage"—the industry term for theft—regardless of social pressures? After all, CVS is not refusing to sell condoms.

But that doesn't excuse the lockdown policy. And here's why: There are anti-theft systems that don't discourage condom purchases. Want proof? Just visit CVS's biggest competitors: Walgreens and Rite Aid.

Walgreens has "a corporate, across the board policy to make sure that condoms are not locked up and they are accessible to customers," spokesperson Vivika Vergara tells *POZ*. If a store does lock them up, "we would contact the store manager and find out why and relay what our corporate policy is."

And at Rite Aid, "condoms are not locked up, and they are not to be held behind the counters," explains Sheryl Slavinsky, the company's director of public relations. "But we do have—in stores that have really high theft—something called Stop Lock." That's a system in which the first item on the shelf is available to the customer but the rest are attached to a peg; shoppers who want more than one item must ask for assistance.

Even CVS has explored a similar alternative. It installed control-released click boxes, similar to vending machines, that dispense product one at a time in its Washington, DC, locations after pressure from a coalition called Save Lives: Free the Condoms (SLFC).

As long as the click boxes work and the first item in the Stop Lock system is stocked, these seem like viable compromises. Another possibility is tagging condom boxes with electronic article surveillance (EAS) dots that will activate an alarm if customers leave without paying.

"Stealing is wrong. Period. End of story," said former SLFC member Jana Baldwin. And yet she doesn't purchase condoms—she gets them free from the health department. You can do the same; to locate an organization that provides free condoms in your city, visit *POZ*'s Health Services Directory.

But locating an ASO is not always as convenient as walking into your local drug store. Which is why it's vital for CVS to offer easy access to condoms. If other retailers and supercenters such as Target can sell condoms without resorting to locked cases, CVS can also find a key to its dilemma.

SOUNDING OFF

Twice this summer, POZ.com reported on accusations that CVS was more likely to lock up condoms in neighborhoods of color. Here are some of the online comments:

- **The weight loss drug Alli is locked up in CVS pharmacies near me.** Are we going to blame CVS for the spiraling obesity epidemic? As a minority, I am insulted when people try to make a racial issue where there isn't one.
- **If condoms were locked up, I wouldn't ask for them.** I can't even talk to my doc about condoms, let alone ask a store clerk for a box of them.
- **Oh P-a-l-e-e-e-e-e-a-s-e!** If Change to Win is so concerned about youth's fear of asking for condoms, then why doesn't it provide free condoms at CVS checkout counters?
- **Change to Win is merely a mouthpiece for unionizers.** They shouldn't invoke moral panic over nothing.
- T**he fact that CVS has condoms available that aren't locked up makes the criticism moot and unwarranted.**
- **This is more about class than race.** I've lived in a lower middle class to poor black neighborhood for 23 years, and our CVS locks up condoms along with many other items. I've seen the shoplifting that occurs. In a middle to upper class black neighborhood, things are not locked up.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/cvs-condoms-hiv-17267-1496