

Dealing with contraception at a Catholic university

HIV testing is available to La Salle students, but contraception isn't. Some want things to change to reflect campus reality.

Antonio unwraps an oral swab, a small plastic stick with a hardened cotton ball on the end of it, and instructs the student to place the swab between the gums and cheek. The rest of the La Salle Health Center is closed in order to preserve anonymity for the students testing for HIV.

Antonio works for BEBASHI, an outside partner La Salle hired to offer free HIV tests to the student body. As he waits for the swab to pick up any HIV antibodies that might be present in the mouth of someone who is HIV-positive, Antonio talks about his job.

The day before he helped test students for HIV at a Philadelphia public school.

"We tested about 100 kids," Antonio said.

When asked how many students have come through the health center on this day, he sighed and looked at his watch. It was 2 p.m., halfway through the day's scheduled testing time. "About 15 so far."

Though Antonio is glad to work at La Salle, his organization must work with discretion when dealing with Catholic institutions. There are things the workers aren't supposed to talk about while administering tests. Even when they are asked questions, they are encouraged not to use phrases like "multiple partners" and "premarital sex," and are told not to talk about these subjects in passing if they are addressed by a student.

La Salle's health center, like the rest of the Catholic university, must strike a balance between promoting safe sex and following Catholic doctrine. The health center can promote and educate students about the



The La Salle Student Health Services building is where HIV testing is taking place.

need to practice safe sex and provide HIV and other STD testing, but the practitioners are not allowed to distribute contraceptives or other means of birth control.

"La Salle doesn't really have a choice in terms of distributing birth control," said Margaret McGuinness, the chair of the religion department. "As a Catholic institution, they can't do it. It's as simple as that."

McGuinness cited the various pharmacies in North Philadelphia and the area surrounding campus as practical, convenient places to obtain birth control and contraceptives.

It's not all that difficult for students to get birth control—any CVS or Rite-Aid would be happy to make a sale," she said.

The problem with these places, said sophomore psychology major Sean Ellis is that "at 2 in the morning that isn't an option."

Though Ellis has not had trouble finding contraceptives on campus, he is aware that, with some students, it is a concern.

"Friends of mine have had a difficult

time when they run out of condoms during the night. There is nowhere on campus to get them. So the form of contraception turns into praying really hard."

The closest location to campus that sells contraceptives is New China, a Chinese take-out restaurant near the corner of Olney and Ogontz avenues. New China is open until 2 a.m. For a La Salle student to reach it he or she must cross the often-busy intersection at Olney and Ogontz, a venture many students are unwilling to make at night.

But McGuinness, who is also a practicing Catholic with two teenagers of her own, says that not being able to get access to condoms on campus is an inevitable part of choosing a Catholic college.

"I think the real problem goes back to the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae*," said McGuinness.

The *Humanae Vitae* was a letter written by Pope Paul VI in 1968 to all the Catholic bishops of the world. During this time, many in the Church were contemplating the acceptance of artificial birth control. However, the Pope's letter stated the need for the Church to remain steadfast in its preaching of abstinence and condemning of all methods of birth control.

The reassertion of this Catholic doctrine strengthened the resolve of Catholic institutions, including the Catholic colleges and universities, to strictly adhere to doctrine—a move that brought criticism from many American Catholics.

"There was a huge uproar among American Catholics—and priests kind of gave up preaching on sexual ethics, with the exception of abortion," said McGuinness. "This created, in my mind and the minds of many other parents, a huge problem because there is absolutely no moral guidance coming from church leaders about sexual ethics."

Of course, *Humanae Vitae* was issued more than 10 years before the AIDS epidemic broke out. So the question today is whether the letter should be more broadly interpreted to allow the use of condoms to

protect human health.

Ellis, who is also an employee of the University Ministry and Service (UMAS) interacts with the Christian Brothers regularly. He believes they attempt to find a balance between the Catholic tradition and a modern college environment.

"Several, if not most, of the Brothers believe that health should always come first," said Ellis. "A good Catholic is a live one. The Brothers are realistic and know that no matter what students will be having sex. They just want people to be safe and true to themselves."

The question still remains as to how this balance can be achieved. Resident assistants in the dorms are given first-aid kits to help their residents, but no mention is made about distributing condoms to them. Neither the health center nor the campus bookstore can sell or give away contraceptives.

Meanwhile, the HIV tests BEBASHI administered took two weeks to be processed, so students had to wait anxiously to pick up their test results.

According to McGuinness, "I don't know if it's a happy medium, but the only thing La Salle can do is what they're doing." ❖

"The form of contraception turns into praying really hard."

"A good Catholic is a live one."

Did you know?

The CDC's estimate of the number of people between the ages of 20 and 24 diagnosed with HIV in 2009 is 6,237.

source: cdc.gov

La Salle's Catholic status prohibits mention of contraceptives by health workers.



Back to *La Salen*

Story by
Liz
Wagner
Photos by
Adam
Stapenell