

Condom drive stirs S.African worries

October 19 2012, by Susan Njanji

A drive that would put more condoms in South Africa's classrooms has critics warning it will only stimulate sexual activity, a charge the country's health minister tells AFP is unfounded.

The great roll out has begun. After much planning, South Africa's government has launched a wide-ranging programme to give children from pre-school through pre-university a better chance of staying healthy as they begin to engage in sex.

Few would argue it is unwarranted.

The country, with a population of around 50 million recorded some 94,000 unplanned teen pregnancies in schools last year, of which 77,000 ended in abortions. In addition, one in every 11 people is infected with HIV.

The programme includes childhood immunisations and teaching about [safe sex](#). But it is the handing out of condoms that has grabbed attention and sparked fury, with sceptics uncomfortable that it may force children into early sex.

"We need to think from a child's perspective. When you give a child a toy to play with, for example a toy gun, there's expectation in the way they will use it," said Stanley Makhitha, a Johannesburg-based child rights activist.

"Children who are not [having sex](#) may be tempted to have sex because

they can see that condoms are there."

Against this kind of reaction [Health Minister](#) Aaron Motsoaledi is battling to defend the scheme, which he says is about providing preventive health care especially for children from impoverished backgrounds who lack the most basic facilities.

"We are not going to go to schools, line up pupils and distribute condoms," he said, rather, if children ask for [contraceptives](#), including condoms, "we will meet that demand".

"If a [young person](#) comes asking for services, including condoms, nobody expects us to refuse. They are just coming out in the open to say they are sexually active."

But opposition is vociferous. Cheryllyn Dudley, an African Christian Democratic Party [lawmaker](#), accuses the government of "panicking" in its approach to contain the spread of HIV and teen pregnancies.

"The experience of other countries indicates that condom distribution encourages a culture of casual sex and risky sexual behaviour," she said.

Launching the scheme last week, President Jacob Zuma acknowledged "that this subject makes parents uncomfortable. But we have to face the reality that some learners are sexually active."

LoveLife, a South Africa youth HIV prevention has dismissed as "misplaced" fears that the ready availability of condoms could push up sexual activity among schoolgoers.

"Essentially studies have found that the only effect it has on sexual activity is to make it safer, it doesn't actually increase the amount of [sexual activity](#), it doesn't bring sexual debut earlier," said LoveLife

director Scott Burnett.

In the end school governing bodies will have a final say in whether to make the [condoms](#) available in their schools or not, spreading the debate across the country.

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