

EVENING ECHO

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NEW Health Minister Dr. John O'Connell is to come under pressure from his own party's youth wing, Ógra Fianna Fáil, to back moves for greater access to condoms to help prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.

And, groups working to combat the AIDS threat hope they'll be pushing an open door with the new Minister — who, 20 years ago took on the condom issue as a family planning right, in the face of stiff church opposition.

By TOMMY BARKER

Ógra committee member Rosemary Farrell told the *Echo* they supported the national campaign by *Condom Sense* — a new group which has strong representation in Cork.

They felt legislation outlawing dispensing machines ought to be changed.

Standard machines to dispense condoms will be set up in a small number of outlets in Cork tomorrow, Valentine's Night — and although the move is illegal, it is not intended to be provocative, said campaigner Claire Watson.

Apart from the setting up of condom information stands on Patrick Street tomorrow afternoon, the campaigners will also put two dozen dispensers in certain bars and nightclubs in the city tomorrow night.

And approaches will be made to political leaders and health and education spokespeople to change the recent legislation, which allocated responsibility to the health boards.

Lobbied Minister

Like Ógra, *Condom Sense* lobbied former Health Minister Mary O'Rourke on the issue. They believe change can be effected — and now have their hopes pinned on a new medical voice, in a new, younger Cabinet.

A spokesperson for *Condom Sense* say they are not encouraging people to be sexually active or permissive, merely to take precautions if sexually active.

"Young people must take responsibility for their own lives. The law cannot take that right away from them. The present situation seems designed to prevent responsible behaviour by sexually active people — not to encourage it," they argue.

YOUTH GROUPS BID
FOR CONDOM SALES

Access to condoms

DESPITE the Government's acknowledgment of the need for change, amending family planning legislation remains a delicate matter for our two largest parties.

The most recent proposals, to set an age limit on purchasers of contraceptives and to make them available through the eight health boards, encountered objections from within Fianna Fáil but also from the health board administrations.

Clearly this compromise is not the solution, as evidenced again by rumblings yesterday from Fianna Fáil's youth wing, Ogra Fianna Fáil.

They are backing moves for greater access to condoms to help prevent the spread of AIDS.

A new group, Condom Sense, are determined to set up standard machines to dispense condoms in a small number of outlets in Cork today, with the Gardai promising to prosecute anyone breaking the law.

The demand for contraception has changed radically from 1973, when a fisherman's wife from Skerries, Mary McGee, won an action in the Supreme court allowing married people to purchase contraceptives on prescription in Ireland.

The Health (Family Planning) Act of 1979 was a pragmatic attempt to reconcile two conflicting needs, to placate moral objections and to satisfy a growing need for readily available comprehensive family planning.

It failed, as an Irish response to an Irish problem, because it gave doctors the responsibility to prescribe for non-medical contraceptives from pharmacies, most of which refused to stock condoms.

Obtaining supplies was very difficult, especially in rural areas, and the public went to the family planning clinics.

With those involved in continuing legal difficulties, the Government more recently sought to lumber the health boards with the responsibility.

It is very unlikely that there would be general support in Irish society for condoms from dispensing machines. But one can appreciate the impatience of young people for a practical solution to the problem.

They must feel that Dr. O'Connell, a known supporter of condoms as a family planning right, and a younger Cabinet will give them a more sympathetic hearing.

However, breaking the law is not the best way of making their case in forcing an Irish Government to face up to a long avoided responsibility.

The issue takes on far more urgency with a report from the World Health Organisation that of one million people who contracted the Aids virus during the past eight months, the vast majority did so through heterosexual intercourse.

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