Hello patients,

Let’s spare a thought this month for AIDS educators, that foolhardy group of individuals whose job it is to teach the Australian public how to shoot up and fornicate - and survive.

Let’s face it, they have a difficult and pretty silly job. They spend most of their time sitting in circles with groups of embarrassed strangers putting condoms onto broomsticks or bananas or, when they’re really caught short, onto each other’s fingers.

And when they’re not playing with prophylactics (look it up if you don’t know the meaning ... what do they teach you in schools these days!), they spend their time driving around with an ‘Education Bag’ in the boot of their car - a bag which can get them into an awful lot of trouble. This bag is filled to the brim with a range of condoms and sexual toys which would make a Kings Cross prostitute blush, and a collection of drug accessories which is the envy of every addict they try to ‘educate’.

Of course, while they’re doing the educating, the addicts are out the back nicking the ‘fits’, as they’re called, out of the boot of the educator’s car. It’s a kind of ‘instant needle exchange program’, only the teacher gets nothing back. Although I’m told that at least this way they don’t have to cope with the loony opposition they’d get if they tried to set up the real thing.

But, as I said, this Educator’s Bag can get them into a lot of trouble. Several of my AIDS Educator patients have had this unnerving experience. They were driving along a country road and suddenly they were pulled over for speeding. The eager young constable then decides to search the car and he finds The Bag. Then my patients have had to try to explain to a sceptical young country officer why their bag is filled with needles and sexual filth. It certainly tests some of the ‘communication and negotiation skills’ these AIDS Educators are supposed to be able to teach!

As fear grows in the community about the spread of AIDS, the pressure is on this band of trainers to change deep-seated and complex human behaviours - and all the public want to talk about are toilet seats and mosquitoes. (“Can you get it from that? Can you get it from that?” the average Aussie cries.)

As fear in the government grows about the cost of caring for the sick and dying, the pressure is on the trainers to stop the spread of the virus. The government wants them to ‘educate, co-ordinate and evaluate’ - but of course what the government really wants them to do is to come in under budget.

And so, with a growing public health problem and limited resources, the pressure is on the AIDS Educators to kick goals! - without a ball! It’s not surprising that they’re suffering from psycho-sexual stress at the moment. They are the people who have to answer all the questions in the wake of each new terrifying media campaign about AIDS. As all those couples start falling onto beds of needles, the phones start ringing with the questions.

The questions in country areas can be particularly difficult, for example, this frequently asked question which puts the beef industry in a whole new light: “If a man with AIDS has sex with a cow, and then I milk the cow and drink the milk, will I get it?” And “What if a mosquito bites a man with AIDS and then bites the cow, will I get it then?”

Country AIDS Educators must also grapple with what I refer to clinically as ‘The Easter Show Factor’ - that time of the year when country folk come down to the Big Smoke to have a little Creek (the Ottoman Ride) with a city prostitute and to share a needle with the stock and station agent from Elders.

But perhaps the most difficult situation to deal with is the earnest Australian male who looks the AIDS Educator in the eye and says, “Yes, I do occasionally visit the men’s toilets behind the footy club for a f.c.k and s.c.k” (as they so bluntly put it, I hope I don’t have to spell this out). “But I’m definitely not a poofeter because I’m married, I’ve got fourteen children, I’m a Catholic, and if that doesn’t convince you, I’m a Rotarian!”

It’s at about this point in the conversation that many AIDS Educators start to think about changing to a sensible job like the Quit campaign, or the baby health immunisation program.

But even the problem of the Aussie father of fourteen pales into insignificance when the Educator is faced with the apparently sane and intelligent Australian woman who still falls for the following two lines -

“If you loved me you wouldn’t want me to wear a condom” and “I have been faithful to you for the entire 32 years of our married life.”

Patients, there’ll be more on AIDS in this column next month. Goodbye until then.

Send your problems to Dr Hartman’s secretary, Julie McCrossin, care of ALR.