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社会热点系列
Need to Know Series

性传播疾病

Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Sean Connolly

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中国青年出版社
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STDs

The dawn of the 21st century has brought with it an exciting array of scientific advances. People eat better, remain healthier and live longer than at any other time in history. So it seems strange that we are still trying to combat some of the same 'curable' diseases that affected people more than 2000 years ago. Yet that is where we stand with **gonorrhoea**, one of the 25 or so sexually **transmitted** diseases (STDs). Although it is sexual contact that spreads these diseases from one person to another, it is ignorance about them that really allows them to flourish. Too few people – even some who are themselves infected – follow the simple medical advice on how to prevent STD infection.


Knowing the enemy

This book aims to overturn some of that ignorance. It looks at the recent rise in STDs, especially since the well-publicized spread of HIV and AIDS infection – itself a sexually transmitted disease. As recently as the late 1970s, many medical experts were predicting

that curable STDs such as **sypphilis** would be wiped out. That has not happened, and since then more than a dozen other new STDs have been identified.

The following pages offer an explanation of what STDs are, as well as how they can be prevented and treated. No matter what form they take – **virus**, bacteria or insect – they all pass from person to person in the same way. What happens after that depends on the disease itself, and many STDs mask their arrival for a long time.

The core of this book deals closely with six of the most common STDs. They also represent three of the main types of sexually transmitted disease: viral, bacterial and insect. It examines them closely, providing details on their **symptoms, diagnosis** and treatment. Just as importantly, this book offers advice on how to deal personally with STD infections, how to talk to others about the issue and where to find **confidential** advice and counselling. In fact, everything you 'need to know'.

A photograph showing a healthcare professional in a white coat and red stethoscope drawing blood from a patient's arm. The patient is a woman with dark hair, wearing a dark sweater and blue jeans, smiling. She has a green identification band on her left wrist and a metal ID band on her right wrist. The healthcare professional is using a syringe to draw blood from the patient's right arm. The scene is set in a clinical or hospital environment.

**Some STDs are
diagnosed by a
blood test.**

What are STDs?

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are infections that can be spread by having sex with another person who is infected. They are among the most common infectious diseases in the world today. More than 24 STDs have now been identified. Most of these are curable, although some are not. Many people who have an STD do not even know it. They may look healthy, but they still could have an STD. Some people do not tell their sexual partner, even if they know they have one.

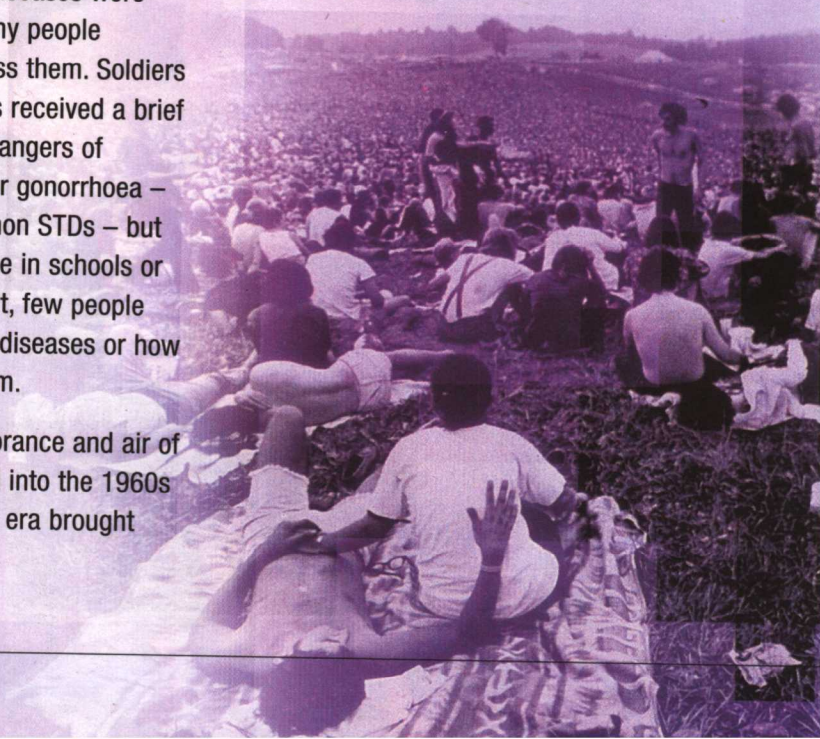
Secrecy and shame

Until the late 20th century STDs were known as **venereal diseases** or simply 'VD'. Although these diseases were quite widespread, many people preferred not to discuss them. Soldiers and sailors sometimes received a brief '**pep talk**' about the dangers of **contracting** syphilis or gonorrhoea – two of the most common STDs – but the subject rarely arose in schools or youth clubs. As a result, few people knew much about the diseases or how to prevent or treat them.

Unfortunately, this ignorance and air of secrecy continued well into the 1960s and even beyond. That era brought

many changes in people's sexual behaviour. One of the most important changes since that time is that young people are becoming sexually active earlier in life, yet marrying later. This combination means that on the whole people now have more sexual partners in their lives. With the increase in sexual partners comes the increased risk of contracting – or infecting someone else with – a sexually transmitted disease.

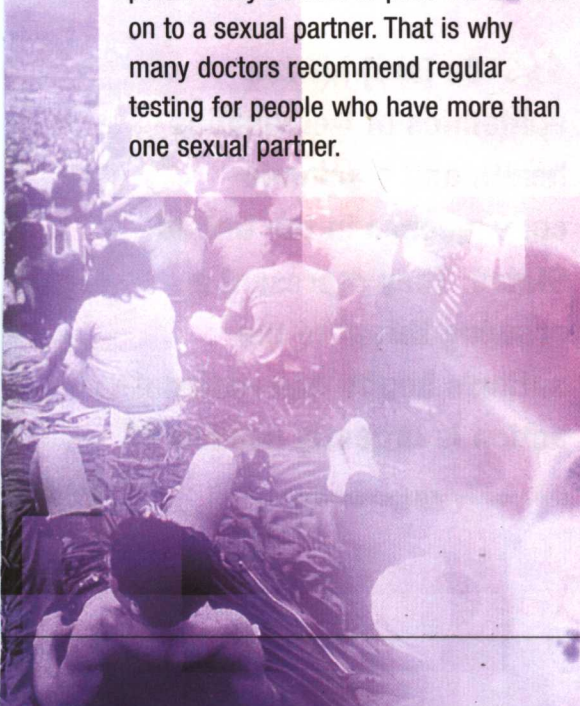
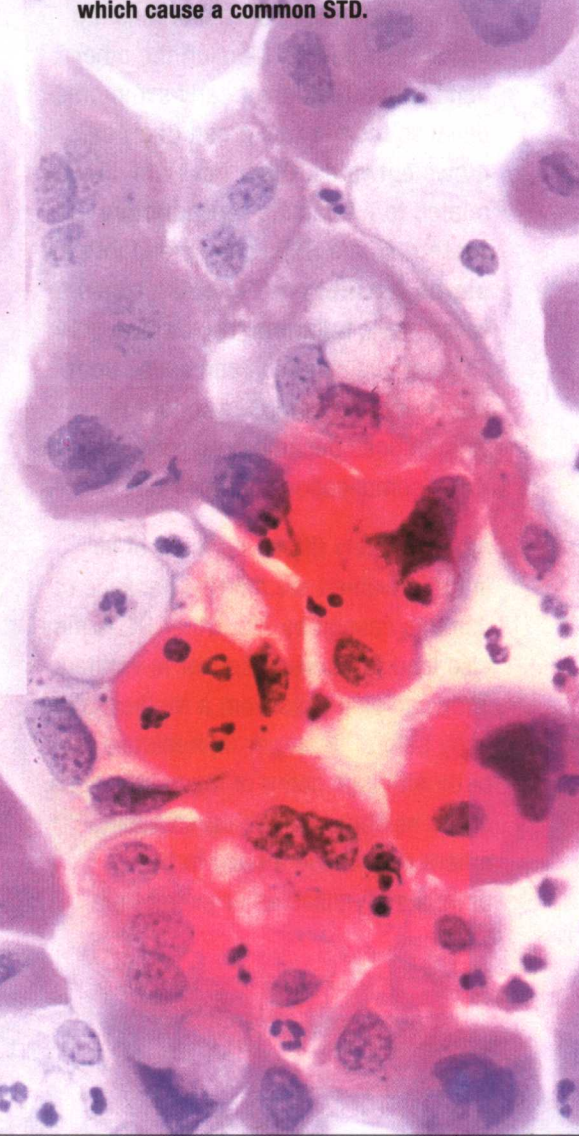
The Woodstock Festival in 1969 was typical of the decade when a new era of sexual freedom was beginning.



The hidden foe

Many organisms cause these diseases. Most of them are too small to be seen with the naked eye, except for **pubic lice** – tiny insects that live and breed in the pubic hair around a person's **genital** area. Bacteria and viruses are two common types of organism that cause infection as they pass from one person to another in body fluids. **Fungi** and even yeasts can also cause STDs. Most of the time, STDs cause no symptoms, particularly in women. Some people can confuse STD symptoms with those of other diseases not transmitted through sexual contact. Even when an STD causes no symptoms, an infected person may be able to pass the disease on to a sexual partner. That is why many doctors recommend regular testing for people who have more than one sexual partner.

A micrograph (photo of a microscopic image) shows the presence of *Chlamydia trachomatis* bacteria, which cause a common STD.



What are STDs?

The risks for women

Although STDs are dangerous for whoever develops them, women face particular risks. The early symptoms of some STDs are hardly noticeable in women, since their sexual organs are inside their bodies. Men, on the other hand, can often detect early symptoms because their sexual organ (the **penis**) grows outwards. Other risks are directly related to the female **reproductive system**. Some STDs can spread into the **uterus (womb)** and **Fallopian tubes** to cause pelvic **inflammatory** disease (PID). This serious condition can cause both **infertility** and **complications** if the woman does become pregnant. Some of these complications can be fatal.

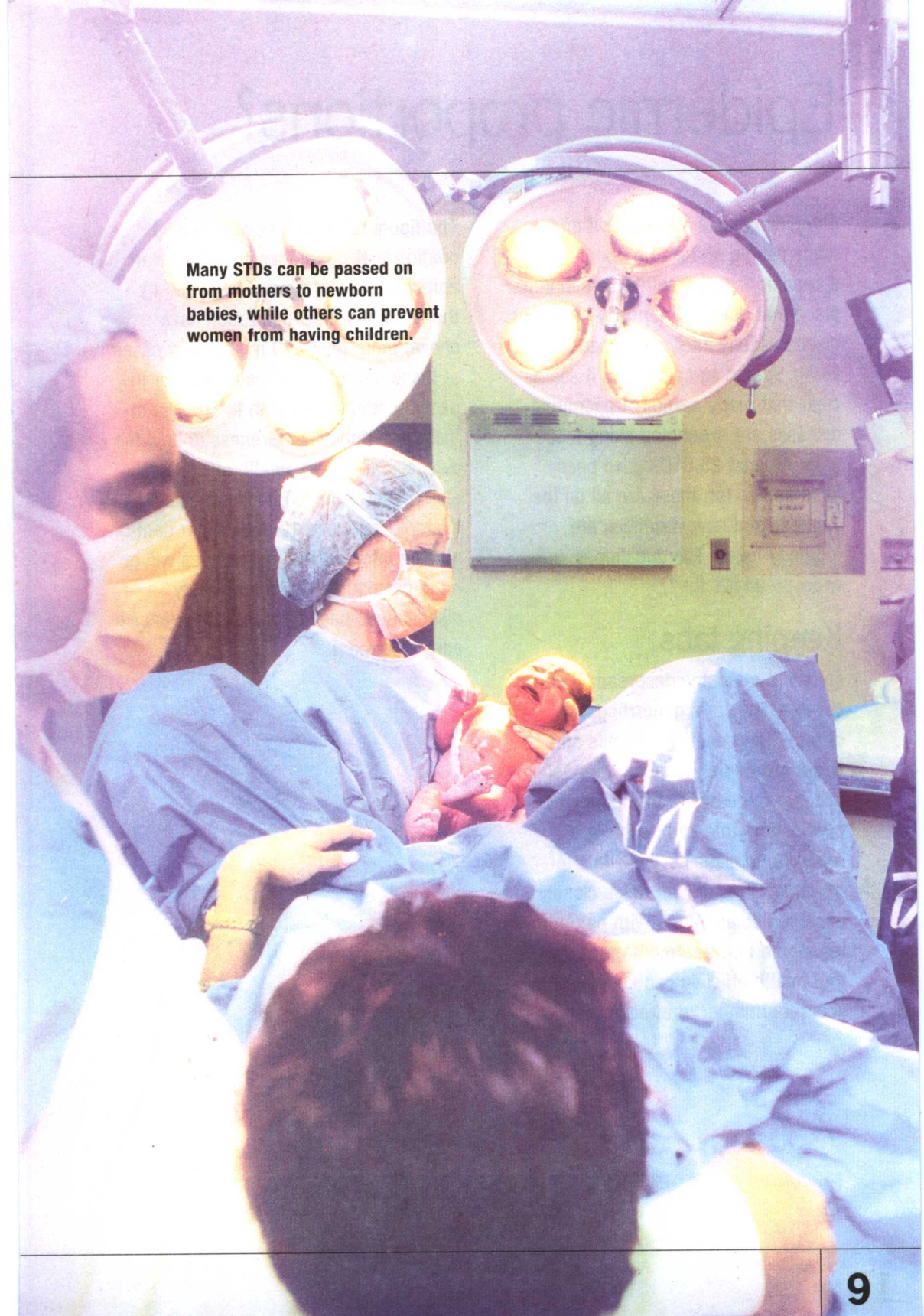
Approximately fifteen per cent of all infertile women are infertile because of damage caused by PID. Other STDs may also lead to **cervical** cancer in women. They can also pass from a mother to her baby before, during or immediately after birth. Although some of these infections of the newborn can be cured easily, others may cause a baby to be permanently disabled or even to die.

Using our knowledge

Understanding the basic facts about STDs – the ways in which they are spread, their common symptoms and how they can be treated – is the first step toward prevention. If they are detected and treated early, many STDs can be treated effectively. Some can even be cured. However, other infections have become resistant to the drugs used to treat them and now require newer types of medicine. Recent research suggests that having some types of STD actually increases the risk of being infected with the HIV virus, which in turn leads to AIDS.

“STDs [are] hidden epidemics of tremendous health and economic consequence in the United States. They represent a growing threat to the nation’s health and national action is urgently needed.”

(1997 Institute of Medicine report)



Many STDs can be passed on from mothers to newborn babies, while others can prevent women from having children.

Epidemic proportions?

An epidemic is a disease that affects many people at the same time, spreading from person to person in a place that does not normally have that disease. Many infectious diseases, such as flu, spread as epidemics. It seems clear that many sexually transmitted diseases are expanding along these lines. At least 25 STDs have been identified so far; these are all on the increase and new variations are regularly found. The question is: how widespread are they?

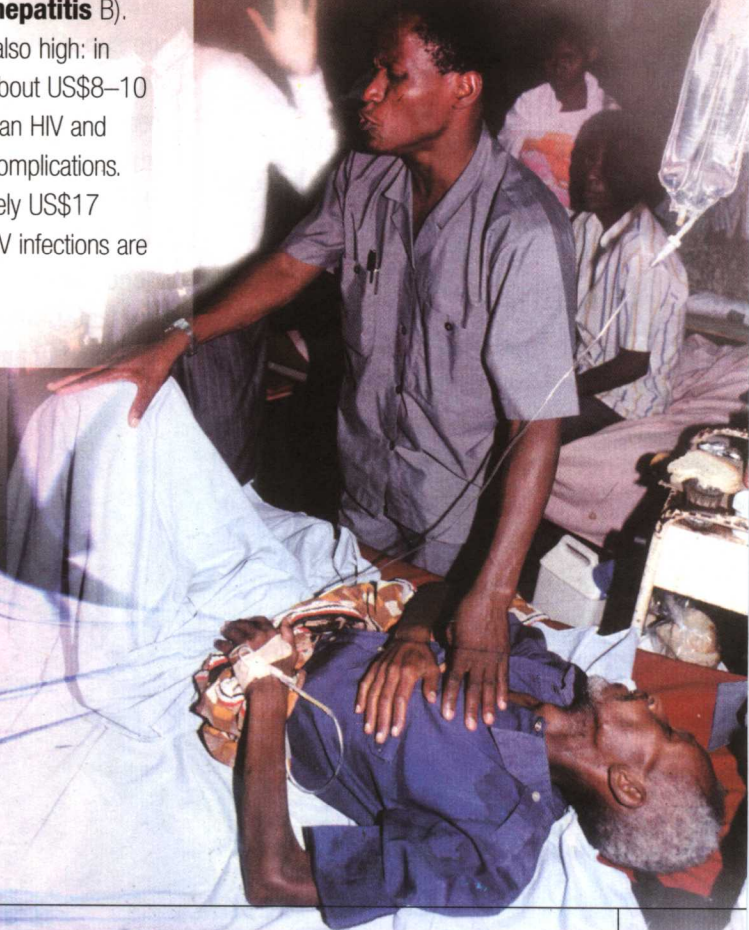
Keeping tabs

Four of the most widespread STDs are curable. They are: gonorrhoea, **chlamydial** infection, syphilis and **trichomoniasis**. Because the public has become more aware of the possible cures, more infected people are reporting to clinics or hospitals for treatment. It is only in these closely observed conditions – with patients registered and treatments **monitored** – that health officials can keep an accurate number of affected people.

The figures that they have amassed confirm that there does seem to be an epidemic. Recent figures compiled by the World Health Organization have shown more than 330 million new cases of these four diseases each year for the past decade. Armed with the results of 'field experience' (awareness of how the diseases progress), health officials can also predict some STD side effects. For example, between 10 and 40 per cent of women infected with gonorrhoea will go on to develop pelvic inflammatory disease (see page 8) unless they receive early treatment.

An American snapshot

The USA compiles some of the most detailed statistics about sexually transmitted diseases, and the numbers are alarming. More than 15.3 million new cases of STDs occur each year, at least one fifth of them among teenagers. Approximately two-thirds of people who acquire STDs in the USA are younger than 25. Of the top eleven reportable diseases in the USA in a typical year, five are transmitted sexually (chlamydial infection, gonorrhoea, HIV, syphilis and **hepatitis B**). The cost of these diseases is also high: in most years, the USA spends about US\$8–10 billion on major STDs (other than HIV and AIDS) and their preventable complications. This figure rises to approximately US\$17 billion if sexually transmitted HIV infections are included.



History of STDs

People have passed diseases on to each other sexually for as long as we can tell. Many distinct STDs might once have been considered as simply different forms of the same disease. Nevertheless, they were definitely understood to be linked to sexual conduct.

Gonorrhoea features in some of the earliest writings in many cultures. The ancient Chinese recognized it and tried many remedies – including **acupuncture** – to treat it. The same disease is mentioned in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. Ancient Jewish doctors advised people to wash with special soaps if they touched someone **infected** with the disease.

New arrival?

People in **medieval** Europe viewed gonorrhoea as a ‘fact of life’ – something to be feared and avoided, but not something that they understood. Many people believed that the disease, like other dangerous illnesses such as the **plague**, was a punishment from God. Things changed in the early 1500s, however.

Although there is now some evidence (see page 15) suggesting otherwise, many experts believe that syphilis was first introduced into Europe in 1493 by crew members returning from Christopher Columbus's first expedition to America. Within a few decades, it had become a major public disease. It was around this time that Paracelsus, a famous German doctor and chemist, began to argue that the new disease was somehow spread from person to person. Although he could find no cure for the disease – or even identify the real cause of it – his views gained importance over the next few centuries. During that time people began to understand how syphilis (and gonorrhoea) spread through sexual contact. **Condoms** and other protective devices became more common.

Columbus's crew encounter Native Americans, who many Europeans blamed for the spread of syphilis to Europe.



Effective treatment

By the early 20th century, medical science had a better idea of how diseases were passed on generally. Powerful microscopes and new medicines enabled researchers to identify viruses and bacteria – the causes of many diseases. In 1905, the German scientist Fritz Schaudinn discovered the bacterium that is responsible for syphilis. A year later, another German – August von Wassermann – developed the first blood test to check for the disease in a patient. In 1909, another German scientist, Paul Ehrlich, discovered the first effective treatment for syphilis: the arsenic-containing compound Salvarsan. Salvarsan did work well against syphilis, but it was expensive to produce and never became widespread as a treatment. The real breakthrough came when the **antibiotic** penicillin was first observed. Although this medicine was first discovered in 1928, it took another decade for the medical world to produce enough of it to be distributed widely.

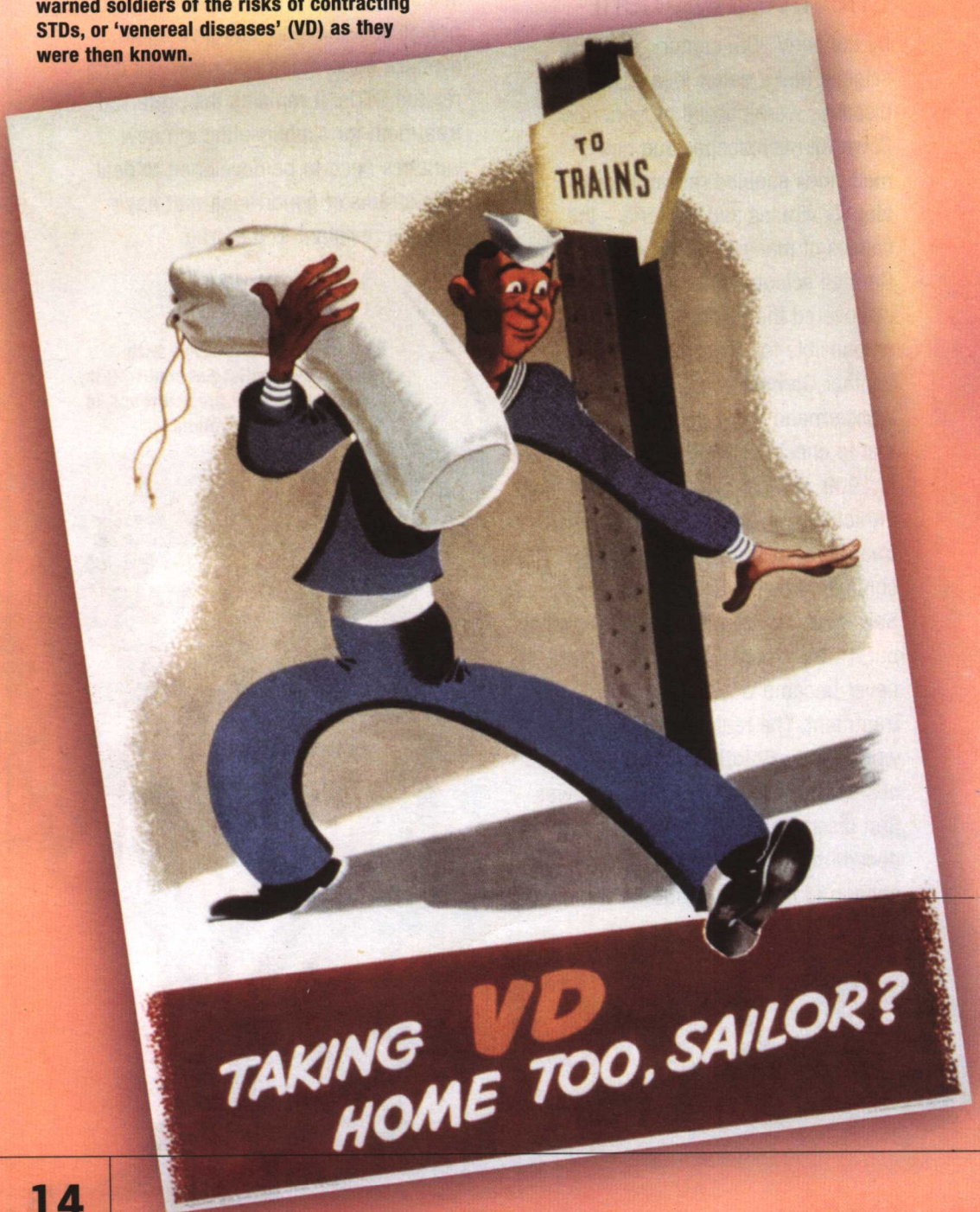
Tests in the early 1940s showed that penicillin was highly effective against syphilis, gonorrhoea and other bacteria-related STDs. It remains the preferred treatment for syphilis although new varieties need to be developed to deal with strains of gonorrhoea that have become resistant to the drug.

Paul Ehrlich, shown here with Japanese scientist Sahachiro Hata, made the medical breakthrough in the treatment of syphilis.



History of STDs

Health posters during the Second World War warned soldiers of the risks of contracting STDs, or 'venereal diseases' (VD) as they were then known.



Dealing with the problem

Penicillin and other antibiotics, of course, only work against bacteria and have no effect on viral STDs such as hepatitis B and **herpes**. However, after the Second World War, the penicillin treatment began to achieve real success against the two main STDs of the time, syphilis and gonorrhoea. The number of syphilis cases reported in the USA fell from 106,000 in 1947 to 25,000 in 1975.

Working against this successful trend was the change in sexual thinking that took hold in the 1960s and 1970s. STDs became more widespread as sexual attitudes became freer, and also because many people believed (wrongly) that the diseases had been wiped out. The arrival of HIV and AIDS in the 1980s distracted much attention away from 'traditional' STDs, and health officials are still dealing with dangerous increases in nearly every sexually transmitted disease today.

Early precautions

The ancient Egyptians were familiar with condoms and used a linen **sheath** to protect against insects and to combat tropical diseases. Silk was the preferred material for Chinese condoms, while the Japanese used leather and tortoiseshell sheaths. Men in ancient Rome used condoms made from goat bladders, while Roman women protected themselves with tampons dipped in herbs. Europeans in the 18th century had a selection of materials for their condoms, preferring those made from silk, linen and lamb gut.

Challenging history

Female bones dug up in a churchyard in Rivenhall, near Witham, England, are thought to disprove the long-standing belief that Christopher Columbus was responsible for importing syphilis into Europe in the late 15th century. **Archaeologists** have unearthed the skeleton of a woman, aged between 25 and 50, who suffered from this venereal disease at least 50 years before Columbus discovered America in 1492. Scientists are 95 per cent certain that the woman, who is believed to have contracted the disease up to a decade before her death, lived in the medieval settlement some time between 1290 and 1445.

A special case

By the late 1970s, the world had become more familiar with the range and dangers of sexually transmitted diseases. 'New' STDs, such as the herpes virus, gained a lot of publicity and campaigns were started to make the public more aware of both precautions and prevention. Then, in the early 1980s a new disease, which we now know as AIDS, began to sweep across the world. The causes of AIDS remained a mystery for several years, although it became apparent that the condition seemed to be a deadly STD. At first AIDS seemed to be confined to the gay community in major cities but it soon became clear that the condition was also linked to **heterosexual** relations.

Increased awareness

In the two decades since AIDS was first identified worldwide, many books have been written on the subject, including a companion book in this series (*Need to Know: HIV and AIDS*). There has also been a great deal of important research. Most scientists now link the deadly

condition of AIDS – which leaves the body open to infection from many sources – with a particular virus. It is this virus, known as the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) that is passed on from one person to another. An HIV-positive person – that is, somebody infected with the HIV virus – can infect someone else. The virus moves to another human when bodily fluids from an infected person pass to another person.

One of the major ways in which fluids pass from person to person is through sexual contact. So for that reason, AIDS (and the HIV infection that leads to it) qualifies as a sexually transmitted disease. There are other ways in which this infection can be passed – through infected blood and even in a mother's milk – but it is the sexual transmission of the virus that worries medical experts most.