

January 30, 2007

Mr. Marc Cherry  
Mr. George Perkins  
Executive Producers  
Desperate Housewives  
Touchstone Television  
100 Universal City Plaza  
Bldg. 2128, Suite G  
Universal City, CA 91608

Dear Mr. Cherry and Mr. Perkins,

It is with great concern that we write you regarding the January 14, 2007 episode of *Desperate Housewives* entitled "Not While I'm Around." The episode included erroneous and, at times, dangerous information, leading your audience to wrongly believe that:

- Condoms are ineffective;
- Young people need parental permission to obtain birth control pills, and
- Parents can obtain private, confidential sexual health information about their teenager if they call the teen's health care provider.

In a recent study, teens ranked the media as one of the top four sources from which they learn about sex and sexual health. That is to say, that when it comes to teens and sex, young people are listening to what you, the producers of a very popular television show, have to say.

Each day in the United States, 10,000 young people contract a sexually transmitted disease, 2,400 get pregnant and 50 acquire HIV. The United States has the highest teen birth rate and one of the highest rates of STDs in the industrialized world.

We understand that the primary goal of a show such as *Desperate Housewives* is to entertain its audience. We believe, however, that you also have a responsibility to provide accurate information about the topics you choose to include in your storylines.

As such, we would like to provide you with the correct information and request that in future episodes you make every attempt to reflect these facts accurately.

#### I. Condoms Are Highly Effective:

The World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention both report that condoms are *highly effective* in preventing HIV infection when used consistently and correctly. Concurrently, condoms also provide a high level of protection against gonorrhea, Chlamydia, trichomoniasis, and other STDs and can help to reduce a woman's risk for HPV-related cervical cancer. Condoms are 98 percent effective in preventing pregnancy when used correctly and consistently.

When condoms are not used consistently or correctly, their effectiveness rate drops to 85 percent. However, to imply over and over again in the “Not While I’m Around” episode that condoms are ineffective - that they are “*only* 85 percent effective” - is to mislead young people into believing that they should not be vigilant about using condoms *correctly and consistently* each and every time that they have sex. Your writers missed an important opportunity to use the show’s teenage character as a role model to promote condom use - the only tool we have to help people prevent HIV infection if they are sexually active. For more information on condom effectiveness, please visit: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs243/en/>

## II. Young People Do Not Need Parental Permission to Obtain Contraception

The January 14<sup>th</sup> episode of *Desperate Housewives* also led young people to believe that they need parental permission to obtain contraception. In 1977, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Carey v. Population Services International* that minors have a constitutionally protected right to privacy with respect to the use of contraceptives.

Federal funding for family planning, known as Title X, provides young people and other vulnerable populations with access to *confidential*, low-cost contraceptive services. Minors visiting a Title X clinic are not required to obtain parental consent to receive family planning services. As such, young people can access any Planned Parenthood clinic and many government-funded family planning agencies throughout the United States to obtain birth control or other contraceptives without parental permission.

The law recognizes the public health benefit of providing young people with confidential access to family planning services and takes into consideration the fact that without the guarantee of privacy, many teens would rather risk pregnancy than tell their parents they are having sex. As such, while Planned Parenthood and other reproductive health organizations do encourage teens to speak with their parents regarding issues related to sex and contraception, it is not a prerequisite for contraceptive services. For more information about adolescents’ rights to consent visit: <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/tgr/03/4/gr030404.html>

## III. Teens are Guaranteed Patient-Provider Confidentiality

Finally, the January 14<sup>th</sup> episode of *Desperate Housewives* left your audience with the belief that young people have no privacy rights with regard to their health care - a very dangerous misperception that again may keep some young women from seeking family planning services that could help them guard their health and save their lives.

Doctor-patient confidentiality extends to teens visiting Title X family planning clinics. Parents cannot obtain information from the health care provider as to whether or not a teen was prescribed contraception unless the teen provides the clinic with permission to do so. Further, most doctors would certainly not provide such private information about a patient’s health care to someone who requests it over the phone. For more information regarding adolescents and confidentiality please visit: <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/iag/confhlth.htm>

*Desperate Housewives* is a wildly successful show. We congratulate you on your success to date and hope that you will continue to entertain your audiences while recognizing the great responsibility and power you have to educate as well.

Sincerely,

ACLU Reproductive Freedom Project  
Advocates for Youth  
Association of Reproductive Health Professionals (ARHP)  
Family Planning Advocates of New York State  
NARAL Pro-Choice New York/Adolescent Health Care Communication Project  
National Abortion Federation (NAF)  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health  
National Organization for Women  
Physicians for Reproductive Choice and Health  
Pro-Choice Public Education Project (PEP)

Cc: Steve McPherson, President of ABC  
Kevin Murphy, co-executive producer/writer, "Not While I'm Around," *Desperate Housewives*  
Kevin Etten, producer and writer, "Not While I'm Around," *Desperate Housewives*