

Compulsory Pre-Marriage Health Certificate Needed

By Barrington H. Brennen, January 15, 2004

Question: Dear Sir, I've been married for more than fifteen years, and I did not know that my husband had AIDS until six months ago. Although he has been faithful during the marriage, I am now devastated because of his sexual life before we met. I am severely depressed and had to seek medical and psychological help to cope with the pain. Should there be a law requiring couples to disclose serious and communicable illnesses before they get married?

Answer:

Dear Friend, Yes, It is my opinion that couples should be required by the government to obtain a pre-marriage health certificate to get their licence to marry. Within the next few months I will be proposing to the government a "Pre-Marriage Health Disclosure Bill" and the reasons for making mandatory that couples seek a medical exam before getting married.

HONESTY AND OPENNESS

Honesty is always telling the truth, and openness is volunteering the truth. Many individuals feel that if they are not asked, they need not tell; but if they are asked they will not lie. There are still others who feel their life before they met their mate has no relevancy to the current relationship. This is far from the truth. The secret past has a way of revealing itself, often in very painful ways.

Marriage is a lifetime commitment of two individuals who love each other. It demands total honesty, integrity, and trust. Too many individuals are not entering marriage with the high level of honesty and openness that is needed. They cover up the consequences of past indiscretions, thinking that they will have no effect on their relationship. It is my opinion, that the government is responsible for ensuring that individuals getting married meet basic minimum health standards which are needed for a productive happy marriage and a healthy nation. Indiscretion and dishonesty among individuals getting married are taxing the nation's health and judicial systems. I am not suggesting that a health certificate is for the purpose of refusing a marriage licence. I am suggesting that this will ensure that both parties are legally bound to inform their mates of their health status before they get married. It will be up to each individual getting married to decide if he/she will continue the relationship based on health results.

THE PAIN OF DISHONESTY

Imagine the pain a partner experiences after making a lifetime commitment to someone in marriage, then finding out that their spouse has a sexually transmitted infection or serious health illness. It can drive one crazy. I am not only referring to persons who have had multiple sex partners before marriage. A pre-marriage health certificate is also important for persons who only had sex one time before meeting their married partner or if they are virgins. Many persons have contracted a sexually transmitted infection on their first sexual encounter. This is one reason sexual abstinence is so important before marriage. Many persons would not have made a commitment to marriage if they knew their partner had a serious physical or mental disorder. Or if they were knowledgeable about the problem before marriage, they would have been better prepared for the

consequences that followed.

When someone finds out that her spouse lied about his or her sexual encounters before or after marriage, something fundamental dies within that person—faith and trust. It rips a hole into one's heart. It is as if a loved one has literally died unexpectedly. The person begins to grieve because there is a “death” in the family—the relationship. Immediately after the “death,” feelings of numbness, acute pain, anger, or powerlessness may overcome one. Often this victim of dishonesty needs psychological and medical help to overcome the shock. Life never remains the same again.

HOW WILL IT WORK?

What health tests should be included in a pre-marriage health examination? What should be the procedure for obtaining a health certificate and marriage licence? The government should issue an official form that couples should use to obtain a pre-marriage health certificate. The form (one per individual) should include the list of required health tests and a place for official authentication of the health examination by the physician. Couples should return each form, along with the lab results, to the marriage registration office to obtain the marriage licence.

The physical health examination should include a general health check up and blood type. Specific tests should include HIV, Syphilis, and Chlamydia, and any other sexually transmitted disease the government deems necessary; as well as tuberculosis, and sickle cell. If the female is sexually active or is more than forty years old, then a pap smear and breast examination is important. In males more than forty years old, there should be a prostate examination. The exam can also include, after the medical doctor's interview or upon a pre-marriage counselor's recommendation, health tests dealing with serious medical problems that may be common in one's family. For example, heart and kidney diseases, or even mental health problems such as schizophrenia.

AVAILABILITY AND COST

The required forms needed for pre-marriage health certification should be made available to medical doctors, pre-marriage counselors, and pastors. However, I recommend highly that a person doing pre-marriage counseling with the couple (pastor, pre-marriage educator, marriage and family therapist, psychologist) also signs the form indicating that dialogue and discussion has taken place regarding the test results. I believe that included in this “Pre-Marriage Health Examination Policy” persons who provide pre-marriage counseling should be required to discuss the subject of “health in marriage.”

Who should fund the pre-marriage health examination? It is my opinion that this examination should be the total responsibility of the couple. However, the government may consider granting a fifty percent discount at government clinics. Too often a couple spends more time and money preparing for the wedding than for the marriage itself. If a couple cannot afford such a medical examination, I believe they may not be ready for marriage. Let's take marriage and the preparation for marriage very seriously. Send your questions to questions@soencouragment.org Or call 393 2818 or mail them to Questions at P.O. Box 896, Nassau, Bahamas.