

Brothers are aiming to handbag Durex

Rosemary Bennett

Social Affairs Correspondent

Two brothers who run a pharmacy in Baker Street, Central London, are about to take on the mighty Durex corporation with a cut-price condom aimed at young women.

Shandip and Ketan Shah said that condoms were overpriced, largely owing to Durex's near monopoly of the market — it accounts for 95 per cent of all branded condom sales, so is under no pressure to reduce the price.

The brothers said that they felt compelled to act after growing numbers of distressed and anxious young women came into their shop, NVS Pharmacy, seeking emergency morning-after contraception.

During their research into improving contraceptives, they were astonished to find that condoms in Britain are among the world's most expensive.

Until 2006, a packet of 12 Durex condoms cost more than anywhere else in the world. That year Gordon Brown cut the VAT on them from 17.5 per cent to 5 per cent. Despite this, British prices are still in the top three, behind Ireland and the Netherlands.

The Shahs said that given the high rate of teenage pregnancy and poor sexual health in Britain, condoms should be far cheaper.

Their new condoms, called Fusion, will be sold for £1.99 for three compared with about £3.50 for the Durex equivalent.

As well as their low price, Fusion are packaged differently and are contained in a thin wallet the size of a book of matches. They are not instantly recognisable as contraceptives, which the brothers hope will make them more appealing to women. Research shows that women do not feel comfortable having condoms in their handbag or purse.

Shandip Shah said that he hoped Fusion would help to improve the sexual health of young people.

"I spend a lot of time on the shop floor and over the last four or five years we have seen a big increase in the number of girls coming in looking for the morning-after pill," he said.

"They are always very distressed and anxious. We felt we wanted to do something to help them stop getting

pregnant in the first place."

The brothers spent months travelling around the world to source a hi-tech rubber manufacturer able to produce condoms to international standards but at a price that would allow them to undercut Durex substantially.

Chemists who stock Fusion will also enjoy a higher mark-up on the condoms of about 50 per cent compared with about a third for Durex.

Mr Shah refused to say how much profit they hoped to make, saying only that the project was "commercially viable" for them. "The priority is to have it for sale at the lowest price we can get," he said.

Having seen Richard Branson's Mates condoms fail to make much impact on Durex's grip on the market, the Shahs were also determined to make their condoms distinctive.

"It is still men who predominantly buy condoms and we want to change that. We want to say this is a trendy but essential item to take on your night out. It is different to what else is around. If we can persuade girls to carry something that doesn't look like a pack of condoms in their bags, maybe we can bring down the rates of sexually transmitted diseases in this country, which are truly terrible," he said.

The brothers have managed to get half of all independent chemists in England to stock Fusion and hope to

have them in all independent chemists by the end of the year. They have also just signed a deal with Club 18-30 for 150,000 **Fusion condoms**, which will be offered free to all its customers this summer.

Durex said it had no plans to cut its prices. "Research has shown that price is not a major factor in the decision-making process when people are buying condoms. The primary concern is for quality and not price," a spokeswoman said. "Our reputation, which spans over 75 years, is based on the fact we are committed to helping people have safer and better sex."



RICHARD POHLE

Ketan Shah, left, and Shandip want women to carry condoms in their bags