

Taking the sex out of sexual health screening

Young women would accept age-based screening for the sexually transmitted infection chlamydia, but would want this test to be offered to everyone, rather than to people ‘singled out’ according to their sexual history.

In the study, published in the BioMed Central open access journal *BMC Infectious Diseases*, the Australian women interviewed did not like discussing their sex lives with their GPs. Some said they would even lie about how many sexual partners they had had if asked. In response to these findings, the study authors suggest that a detailed sexual history should not be required before testing women for chlamydia.

Chlamydia is Australia’s and the UK’s most commonly diagnosed sexually transmitted infection (STI). It is most prevalent in the under-25s and can have serious long-term health consequences, including causing infertility in women.

A team comprising three doctors, a sociologist and an epidemiologist at the University of Melbourne, Australia aimed to find out what young Australian women thought about the introduction of chlamydia screening into general practice. The researchers interviewed 24 sexually active women aged 16 to 24 who attended one of a sample of general practices. Equal numbers of women from rural, regional and urban areas were questioned.

In contrast to previous research, which suggests women are not concerned about giving information about their sexual history in the context of a family planning or sexual health clinic, interviewees were reluctant to provide such a history to their GPs. This is a new finding which raises the question of whether a sexual history is really necessary when screening for chlamydia.

The authors acknowledge that it is important for young women to understand that chlamydia is an STI and that sexual partners should be notified if someone tests positive. However, they said that chlamydia testing should be destigmatised. “In general practice the offer [of a chlamydia test] may seem to come ‘out of the blue’” says Natasha Pavlin, who coordinated the study. “The importance of normalising the offer of chlamydia testing, so that individual women do not feel singled out, cannot be overemphasised.”

Source: BioMed Central

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