

# The rise of syphilis in Aotearoa New Zealand: key trends from New Zealand's STI surveillance system

## Authors:

Duff P<sup>1</sup>, Thirkell C<sup>1,2</sup>, Kumbaroff Z<sup>1</sup>, Anglemyer A<sup>1,3</sup>, McNeil Andrea<sup>1</sup>, Scott, J<sup>1,4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Health Intelligence Team, Institute of Environmental Science and Research, Wellington, New Zealand, <sup>2</sup>Australian National University (ANU), Canberra, Australia, <sup>3</sup>Department of Preventive and Social Medicine, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, <sup>4</sup>Wellington Sexual Health Clinic, Wellington, New Zealand.

## Background:

Recent increases in chlamydia, gonorrhoea, and syphilis have been reported across a number of countries globally, alongside a resurgence of maternal and congenital syphilis in some settings. In light of these recent increases, this overview highlights recent key STI trends in Aotearoa New Zealand, with a focus on infectious and congenital syphilis.

## Methods:

Aotearoa New Zealand's STI surveillance system consists of a combination of laboratory surveillance (for chlamydia and gonorrhoea) and clinician-based surveillance using REDCap (for gonorrhoea and syphilis), undertaken by the Institute of Environment Science & Research (ESR) on behalf of Manatū Hauora (Ministry of Health). Drawing on these surveillance data, descriptive statistics were used to describe recent key STI trends (2018-2022).

## Results:

In contrast to minor increases in gonorrhoea and chlamydia notifications between 2021 and 2022, infectious syphilis notifications rose sharply in the latter half of 2022, particularly among men who have sex with men (MSM). Maternal and congenital syphilis continues to be persistently high, with seven congenital syphilis cases reported in 2022, largely linked to no or late access to antenatal care. Gonorrhoea, chlamydia, and maternal and congenital syphilis continue to disproportionately impact key populations, including Māori and Pasifika, MSM, and young people.

## Conclusion:

The recent surge in infectious syphilis and persistently high rates of congenital syphilis, particularly among Māori and Pasifika, are a significant cause for concern. To meet the goals set out in Manatū Hauora's Sexually and Transmitted and Blood Borne Infections Strategy which includes the elimination of congenital syphilis and elimination of ethnic inequities in syphilis, there is a critical need to improve timely access to culturally safe sexual and reproductive health services, including STI testing and antenatal care, for key populations.

## Disclosure of Interest Statement:

*ESR undertakes surveillance of notifiable diseases in Aotearoa New Zealand on behalf of Manatū Hauora (Ministry of Health). No specific funding was received for the development of this study.*