

Syphilis, HIV and other STI positivity in clients presenting as contacts of syphilis at Sydney Sexual Health Centre

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Background:

Syphilis notifications are increasing in Australia, particularly in men who have sex with men (MSM) and Aboriginal people. Empirical treatment of sexual contacts of syphilis is standard of care, however reported rates of transmission to sexual contacts vary widely in the literature. This study aimed to determine the proportion of people who presented as contacts of syphilis who tested positive for syphilis, as well as HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STI). Secondary objectives were the uptake of empirical treatment and the proportion of contacts using HIV Pre exposure prophylaxis (PrEP).

Methods:

Retrospective review of all clients reporting contact with syphilis at Sydney Sexual Health Centre from January to December 2018. Files were extracted from electronic medical records based on diagnostic codes. Syphilis serology, HIV status, PrEP use and other sexual health screening data was collected. Syphilis-positive contacts were compared to syphilis-negative contacts for potential risk factors for transmission.

Results:

Among 191 contacts of syphilis, 15 (7.9%) were diagnosed with syphilis. Among the 15 infected contacts, three (20%) had primary syphilis, four (26.7%) had secondary syphilis and eight (53.3%) had latent syphilis. Contacts who were HIV positive were more likely to have syphilis (33% (5/15) vs 11.9% (21/176), $P=0.02$). Among 183 contacts of syphilis who were tested for HIV and other STI, 38 (20.8%) were diagnosed with a non-syphilis infection including two new HIV infections.

Conclusions:

Syphilis transmission to sexual contacts is lower than previously reported rates, with 7.9% of contacts being diagnosed with syphilis. However, contacts of syphilis should be considered a high-risk group for HIV and other STIs, with 1 in 5 having an incidental diagnosis of HIV, chlamydia, gonorrhoea or genital herpes.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

Nil to disclose