

Challenges and opportunities for Sexual Health services during COVID-19

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Background/Purpose:

The testing and treatment of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) for key populations remain critical in optimizing health during the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey of sexual health clinics identified changes to service provision and demand for STI testing and treatment.

Approach:

Staff redeployment, PPE shortages and efforts to reduce potential transmission of COVID-19 all necessitated changes to the provision of sexual health services at the onset of the pandemic. In April 2020, The National Taskforce for BBVs, Sexual Health and COVID-19 surveyed five sentinel sexual health clinics in Australian capital cities. Each clinic was asked three questions: 1. Have there been changes in patient attendance, 2. Have you observed a decline in STI rates, 3. Have you changed the structure of your services.

Outcomes/Impact:

All clinics surveyed had ceased walk-in appointments based on health department directives and were utilising a combination of telehealth and face-to-face appointments for STI screening and HIV positive client clinical care. 60% of clinics reported an increase in self-collected throat and anal swabs. 50% of the clinics using peer-based services had suspended HIV point-of-care testing to minimise close contact between patients and providers. 60% of clinics had stopped offering STI screening to asymptomatic patients. 60% of the clinics reported a 30% - 50% reduction in demand for STI screening, PrEP and PEP services. Two of the clinics reported a 30%-50% decline in positive syphilis test results and one clinic reported a 31% decrease in positive test results for urethral gonorrhoea.

Innovation and Significance:

Sexual Health services quickly adapted to COVID-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions, modifying their services to ensure optimal continuity of care. Social research initiatives and STI surveillance data are needed to better understand changes in sexual behaviour and STI rates during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

Nothing to disclose.