

How is economic evidence conceptualised when evaluating sexual health interventions and the control of sexually transmitted infections? – A systematic review.

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Background:

This systematic review investigates economic evaluations of control programmes for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea, syphilis, and HIV. Local authorities are experiencing budget pressures and sexual health services must compete for funding with other services including social care. It is not clear what approaches are available for commissioners to assess the economic value of sexual health programmes.

Methods:

A search strategy was developed for seven databases (including MEDLINE) for studies published between January 1999 and April 2019, with additional hand searching. The studies were categorised in a two-stage process and extracted into a table, which included a critical assessment of study quality. The results were analysed utilising narrative synthesis.

Results:

9,530 records were screened and categorised. Of these, 31 were included for data extraction and critical appraisal. The majority of studies assessed the cost-effectiveness or cost-utility of screening interventions for chlamydia from a provider perspective. No economic evaluation was identified for syphilis. Main outcome measures were major outcomes averted (MOAs) and quality-adjusted life years (QALYs). All studies evaluated direct medical costs, e.g. programme costs. Nine studies included indirect cost, such as productivity loss due to illness. The study designs were mostly model-based (30) with significant heterogeneity between model designs. There were limitations in assessing uncertainty around the model design. Further, a lack of data was identified in several studies leading to assumptions having to be made and only intermediate outcomes being presented. None of the outcome measures encompassed aspects of equity nor context, which are of high relevance to sexual health decision-makers.

Conclusion:

The review demonstrated wide heterogeneity in approaches to evaluate costs and outcomes for STI control programmes. Overall, the low quality of available studies highlights the need for high-quality economic evaluations to inform the commissioning of sexual health services.

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