Knowledge and Awareness of STD Risk Perception of MSM in Philadelphia

Timothy Chou and Dr. Nancy Brisbon

Sidney Kimmel Medical College, Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia, PA

Introduction

Incidence rates of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) have been rising in this country over the past few years [1]. This problem is especially salient with men who have sex with men (MSM), who historically have been more vulnerable to STDs due to stigma and promiscuous sexual behaviors [2]. A study in Florida used focus groups to assess MSM knowledge of syphilis. They found a lack of knowledge about transmission [3]. A study of MSM in San Francisco found that 61.7% of those surveyed thought that they were at low risk for contracting syphilis [4]. Little is known about MSM awareness of transmission methods for the STDs syphilis, gonorrhea, and chlamydia.

Results

Questions about Gonorrhea

- Having gonorrhea can increase your chances of contracting HIV.
- Symptoms: Discharge, pain during intercourse, burning sensation.

Questions about Syphilis

- The first symptom that occurs when you have contracted syphilis is a chancre.
- The long-term consequence of syphilis is dementia.

Materials and Methods

The goal of the study is to examine what MSM in Philadelphia know about transmission methods and outcomes of the sexually transmitted infections syphilis and gonorrhea to better understand MSM risk perception of these diseases. Any major gaps in knowledge about STD transmission or long term consequences will be identified. This will be useful to public health officials in designing more targeted educational interventions in an attempt to curb the increase in STD incidence. I hypothesize that there will be poor awareness of a link between MSM activities and transmission of syphilis and gonorrhea.

This study will focus on MSM found in Philadelphia. MSM will be reached through connections through the Mazzoni center in Center City, Philadelphia, a clinic focused on providing health services to individuals who identify as LGBTQ. A multiple-choice survey will be distributed to these individuals that acts as a biology “test”, as shown below.

The survey was administered to men who visited the Thomas Jefferson University booth at the Outfest event in Philadelphia on October 7th, 2018, in both paper form and on an iPad. Other surveys were distributed at the William Way Center through the monthly listserv. Participants were instructed to fill the survey out to the best of their knowledge without using outside resources. A total of 87 men who live in the Philadelphia area filled out the survey.

Conclusions

- Surveyed men showed lack of knowledge of symptoms of syphilis, particularly the first symptom and the long term consequence of dementia. These findings suggest that further education could be done about the presentation and long term consequences of syphilis.
- Only 60% knew that gonorrhea presents with discharge as a symptom. While the majority knew that the penis, anus, and throat were sites of infection, about a quarter incorrectly identified the lungs as a site of infection, suggesting that responders may have been guessing and not actually know this information.
- Responders seemed to know what PrEP was and that it does not prevent syphilis, but only 20% were actually taking it. This leaves room for future research investigating why so few men are on PrEP to increase access.
- More education could encourage safe sex practices in MSM and halt the rising rates of syphilis and gonorrhea.

References


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