

RECRUITING TO SEXUAL HEALTH STUDIES: POSSIBLE STRATEGIES IDENTIFIED THROUGH FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

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Background

- Recruiting individuals to take part in studies about sexual health can often be difficult due to the sensitive nature of the study topic.
- This can result in underpowered studies and unrepresentative samples.
- Understanding potential participants' views, motivations and concerns may aid in the design of a recruitment protocol that maximizes participation and minimizes bias.

Research question

- What are effective strategies to recruit tertiary students to take part in a survey about sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing?

Methods

- This qualitative project took place during the initial stages of a study concerning STI testing at a New Zealand university health center.
- A series of three focus groups of between five and seven participants were conducted.
- Focus group participants were sought from the target population for the main study and were recruited via posters displayed around the university.
- Discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim.
- Each transcript was coded by one researcher. The analysis was guided by a constant comparative method so that codes were tested and used iteratively against the data to produce a final set of codes. These were grouped according to theme and a final set of themes produced.

Figure 1. A sample of quotations from the focus groups

I think before I'd probably be more inclined to answer it, like, rather than afterwards cos I'd think 'oh it's sorted, I don't really need to worry about it' or 'oh my gosh!'

Would it be possible to have a choice of the two survey delivery methods, cos that might be the kind of deciding factor for some people, like whether they could do it online or whether they could do it right then

I think that would be a bit awkward for some people, just having to hand it in in person and being seen to hand it in, yeah, that might be awkward for some people.

Results

A total of 53 codes were generated. These were grouped into 36 themes as part of 11 overarching themes, see table 1.

1. A strong theme in all focus groups was about the **timing** of being asked to participate. Generally it was felt that an approach **prior to an STI consultation** would be more acceptable than after.
2. There was no overall preference for paper or online questionnaires, although **confidentiality** was stressed for both methods. Several focus group participants felt it would be best to **give people a choice**.
3. **Stigma** was a common theme. There was concern about being seen taking part in a study about STI testing.
4. There was considerable discussion about the feelings associated with having an STI test: **fear; anxiety; stress; embarrassment**. Several participants highlighted the responsibility of researchers to avoid escalating these feelings.

Table 1. Themes arising in the qualitative data

Overarching themes	Themes
1. Factors that influence participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timing of invitation • Relevance to oneself • Feeling comfortable • Amount of effort required • Having spare time
2. Reasons for participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Altruism • Incentives
3. Mode of approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phone call – viewed negatively • Texting – viewed negatively • Email – viewed positively • Poster/self-select – viewed positively
4. Clinician's role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power relationship between clinician and patient • Clinician behaviour/attitude
5. Confidentiality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privacy • Permissions
6. Method of data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online questionnaire • Paper questionnaire
7. Attributes of a good questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific • Interesting • Educational • Pictures/symbols • Not abstract • Quick • Tick boxes • Scales
8. Study location – what influences where a student would go for an STI test	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urgency for testing • Convenience • Expertise
9. Societal influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stigma • Shame
10. Feelings about STIs and having an STI test	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear • Anxiety • Stress • Embarrassment
11. Perceptions about STIs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serious • Sensitive subject

Conclusion

- Understanding views around STI testing and research participation helped us to develop a protocol that was sympathetic to the target population's attitudes & desires.
- This information may be useful to other researchers planning sexual health surveys in similar populations.