

IS THE INCREASE IN SYPHILIS CASES IN VICTORIA DUE TO INCREASED TESTING?

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Background: Infectious syphilis notifications in Victoria reached a record 946 cases in 2015; a 50% increase on 2014. Reported exposure for 82% of cases was male-to-male sex and 40% of notifications were in HIV positive men. Repeat infection accounted for almost 30% of total notifications.

To better understand this marked increase in syphilis notifications in Victoria we examined syphilis testing data from three Melbourne based GP clinics that specialise in the health of gay and bisexual men (GBM GP).

Methods: De-identified syphilis test records from 2012-2014 were extracted from three sentinel surveillance GBM GP clinics. Descriptive analysis was conducted and Poisson regression was used to examine trends in testing and positivity.

Results: Between 2012 and 2014, 78% of men who tested for syphilis at the three clinics were identified as men who have sex with men (MSM). The syphilis testing rate among MSM increased by 4% ($p < 0.01$) and the proportion positive increased by 16% (1.9% to 2.6%; $p = 0.1$) among HIV negative MSM and 27% (4.1% to 7.4%; $p < 0.01$) among HIV positive MSM.

Sixty two percent of HIV negative and 70% of HIV positive MSM who tested syphilis positive had a 3-6 month follow up test. The proportion positive at retest was 6.3% among HIV negative and 6.7% among HIV positive MSM.

Conclusion: The increase in proportion positive was much greater than the increase in testing and the proportion repeat positive was equally high among both HIV positive and negative MSM. This suggests that continued high risk behaviour is contributing to the increase observed in the Victorian notification data and testing is not occurring at a rate that is likely to curb the epidemic. In the PrEP and TasP era, where there is likely to be an increase in condom-less sex, it will be important to continue to monitor this.

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