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Is regular screening of MSM for genital and extra-genital gonorrhoea needed?

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Background

India has the largest men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM) population in the world. Due to stigma and discrimination attached to MSM in India, it remains a vulnerable population for STIs. *N. gonorrhoeae* is a major public health threat in causing genital, extragenital and disseminated infections. This emerging superbug has developed resistance to most of the antibiotics, especially the strains isolated from extra-genital sites. There is lack of regular screening, prevention and intervention for STIs in MSM in India.

Aim/Methods

A cross-sectional observational study was carried out at the Apex Regional STD Centre, Department of Dermatology & STD, Safdarjung Hospital, New Delhi, India, to determine the prevalence and epidemiology of gonorrhoea in MSM, and to find out common co-infections occurring with gonorrhoea. Routine HIV and VDRL testing, and real-time-PCR was performed on oral, anal and urethral swabs for *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*(NG), *Chlamydia trachomatis*(CT), *Trichomonas vaginalis*(TV), HSV-1&2, *Mycoplasma hominis*(MH), *Mycoplasma genitalium*(MG), *Ureaplasma urealyticum*(UU), *Ureaplasma parvum*(UP) and HPV. Pre-treatment and post-treatment counsellings were done by designated STIs Counsellor. Complete data was systematically recorded and statistically analysed.

Results

The project involved 67 MSM, during 3-months period, with mean-age of 26years. 85% (57) were unmarried while 37.3% (25) were bisexual. 97% (65) reported having multiple sexual-partners with infrequent condom usage (31.3% never and 53.7% sometimes). Most common presenting complaints were burning micturition 13.4%(9) and anal-itching 22.3%(15), while most were asymptomatic. Prevalence of gonorrhoea was 31%(21) in pharyngeal, 17%(12) in rectal and 15%(10) in urethral specimens. Mean age of first sexual exposure was 18.3 years. HPV was the most common co-infection at all three sites, followed by UU, MH and CT. 4(5.9%) were HIV-positive.

Conclusions

MSM form a large hidden population of asymptomatic reservoirs of STIs. The huge burden of infections found in our project emphasise the need for routine screening of the oropharynx, rectum, and urethra. The extra-genital gonococcal infections are often asymptomatic and form a reservoir for drug resistant strains. Timely diagnosis and management of gonorrhoea is essential to decrease the morbidity as well as to prevent the transmission of other STIs, including HIV.