Matters arising

We read with interest the recent correspondence by Wilson et al observing an apparent increase in the prevalence of herpes simplex virus type 1 genital infections among women.

Apparent increase in the prevalence of herpes simplex virus type 1 genital infections among women

We have noted a difference between the general practitioners (GP) referred and self-referred groups in the viral isolates from first episode genital herpes. Among the 128 women who attended with first episode HSV infection between January 1989 and January 1991, 79 patients (61.7%) had already visited their GP with their current complaint prior to the GUM attendance. Of these, 44 patients (55.7%) had type 1 isolates as compared with only 17 (34.7%) of the 49 self-referred patients. The ratio of self referred:GP referred patients in terms of the type of HSV isolated was 1:2:6 for type 1 and 1:1 for type 2; the difference between the two groups is significant ($p=5.34$, $p<0.01$). The two groups were similar in terms of age and history of recent partner change, although a higher proportion of the self-referred group had experienced previous episodes of other sexually transmitted diseases.

We wonder whether the apparent increase in HSV-1 isolates reported from several UK centres may relate in part to a greater willingness of the GPs to refer women to GUM clinics because of their heightened awareness of the need for comprehensive STD screening, counselling and education, and sexual contact management. If so, differences between clinics in both the proportion of GP referrals and the HSV-1:HSV-2 ratio amongst women with first episode genital herpes may relate as much to the acceptability of local GUM services as to real geographical differences in the epidemiology of genital herpes.

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