The control of syphilis, a contemporary problem: a historical perspective

T Green, M D Talbot, R S Morton

The control of syphilis in the United Kingdom and United States has been managed in different ways in each country over the course of the last century. Older more established measures including contact tracing, serological surveillance, and health education strategies together with effective antibiotic therapy have had some success. However, changing social structures on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean have brought newer mathematical and epidemiological methods to the fore. This review looks at the past management of syphilis control in the United Kingdom and United States, and speculates on future prospects for disease management in these countries.

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Introduction

Throughout the developed world the reported incidence of syphilis has fallen steadily over the past four decades. This decrease has been attributed to a range of measures including access to specialist clinics, accurate diagnostic tests, effective antibiotic therapy and contact tracing procedures.

Historically, interest in syphilis has waned as case numbers have fallen and this holds true today. However, the disease is still problematic in parts of the United States, and recent UK outbreaks, although small, have brought the issue of disease control sharply back into focus. This review looks at how the public health threat of syphilis has been assessed and managed by the United Kingdom and United States since the early 1900s and suggests how past lessons may shape future strategies.

Establishing control of syphilis in the United Kingdom

A beginning (1917–39)

The 1916 report of a Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases heralded syphilis control endeavours in the United Kingdom. Government money was provided for the establishment of local health authority venereal disease clinics that were part of a nationwide network of diagnostic and treatment facilities. Public open access, free confidential treatment, voluntary attendance, and service availability at all times to match patient needs were crucial requirements. In all, 117 clinics had been established by the end of 1917 and the network expanded subsequently to 230 facilities.

These clinics provided trained personnel offering early scientific diagnosis, appropriate treatment, and routine follow up. Arrangements were also made for the attendance, testing, and treatment of sexual partners. These measures combined with public health education and routine hospital screening by the Wassermann test led to an overall fall in the prevalence of syphilis. Improvements were seen particularly in the figures for early infectious disease, congenital infection, and mortality. By 1936 the standard mortality rate for general paralysis of the insane was approximately one third of that seen in 1914 while for tabes dorsalis it was just over half.

Control is established (1940–55)

Thousands of infected service personnel were treated during the second world war. The post-war epidemic peak indicated the enormity of infection introduced into the civilian population on demobilisation. Penicillin became available from 1943, initially as an adjunct to, and then as a replacement for, arsenic and bismuth therapy.

Contact tracing was intensified and applied both to family and sexual contacts with the aim of controlling congenital as well as acquired syphilis.

Case finding was also increased by the introduction of serological screening for blood donors, hospital inpatients, and prisoners. Antenatal syphilis screening was introduced for every pregnancy. As many as one in 100 pregnant women were seropositive with multiparous women particularly at risk in the early post-war years. Expectant mothers were treated as inpatients with penicillin and their babies declared syphilis free after testing at 1 and 3 months of age.

These approaches, together with public education about the prevalence and problems of syphilis, reduced disease to an apparently irreducible low level. It was suggested that elimination would be only be achieved by combining nationwide premarital and antenatal screening with adequate treatment of early acquired infection.

Maintaining control (1956–2000)

The above strategies continued to be deployed in an attempt to control syphilis and penicillin remained (and is still) the treatment mainstay.

The number of reported cases in the 1950s declined steadily, but there was a sudden rise in
Establishing control of syphilis in the United States

A MISSED OPPORTUNITY REDEEMED (1917–41)

A mass serological survey in 1917 showed that nearly 6% of the first world war service “enlistees” had reactive syphilis serology. However, despite the post-war establishment of a venereal disease (VD) division in the US public health service there was no useful follow up. Surgeon-general Thomas Parran stated that “Congress believed the spirochete had stayed behind in the trenches” and in 1936 he believed that syphilis was a “dying disease” although the number of early infectious cases soon began to climb again. Optimistic views prevailed, federal support fell, and serological surveillance became less rigidly pursued. This happened despite a new “cluster testing” initiative of social as well as sexual contacts.

Figures published in 1963 showed that of those with untreated syphilis, one in 200 would become blind, one in 44 insane, and one in 25 crippled. Calls were made for the strengthening of contact tracing and improved medical training but in fact many clinic hours were reduced.

In 1964, however, William J Brown, then head of the VD division at the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta, presented his proposals for the eradication of syphilis by 1972. He believed that if 30% of the newly infected were treated before their disease was transmitted, success would be assured. The cooperation of the private physician was vital, so all reactive serology from public and private laboratories was to be reported to local VD control programme directors for action. Sadly, although private physicians saw over 80% of all primary and secondary syphilis in the United States they reported only 12% and able to deal with the expected wartime epidemic.

CONTROL IS ESTABLISHED (1942–55)

US forces medical staff dealt well with infected service personnel at home and abroad. Useful liaisons with civilian medical personnel were fostered in the UK and contact tracing was encouraged. In 1943, US manufactured penicillin became available, first to infected service personnel and subsequently to civilians attending the rapid treatment centres. The existing premarital and prenatal mass screening programmes were augmented by pre-employment and blood donor testing, together with routine syphilis serology for hospital admissions, clinic attendees, jail inmates, and immigrants. In contrast with the post-first world war era these initiatives were brilliantly maintained, so that between 1945 and 1955 over two million Americans were treated for syphilis. As in the United Kingdom, post-war prevalence peaked and then dropped sharply to an all time low in 1955. However, in 1951 there were still 150,000 confirmed cases, 14,000 congenital infections, 6,000 syphilitic mental hospital admissions, and 13,000 adult deaths.

Case finding was also further increased by contact tracing and the treatment of up to 22% of men and 40% of women. In terms of disease stage, contact tracing provided 25% of all primary and secondary cases, 29% of early latent cases, 25% of congenital cases, and 18% of cases of late syphilis. These results led to increased federal funding and the nationwide appointment of public health administrators, originally called epidemiologists, who managed the clinics in the absence of trained medical staff.

MAINTAINING CONTROL (1956–2000)

With the 1955 nadir came the view that syphilis was a “dying disease” although the number of early infectious cases soon began to climb again. Optimistic views prevailed, federal support fell, and serological surveillance became less rigidly pursued. This happened despite a new “cluster testing” initiative of social as well as sexual contacts.

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Continuing partner notification methods are a necessity in some situations and cluster identification of contacts and empirical treatment may also have their place. Patchy reliability of sexual histories in “high risk” populations has been noted, so it seems that the optimal control strategy may need to be varied according to the population characteristics. A variant of the partner notification method, social network analysis, has been a tacit assumption of STD control efforts for some decades. Initially developed to evaluate models of disease dynamics and resource issues, it has been used in the United States to control outbreaks in two settings, and confirms that syphilis is a “neighbourhood disease.”

Conclusion
All the above methods call for serious consideration at this time since history teaches that the prevalence of some diseases is determined by the socioeconomic structure of a society and how that structure functions. Pertinent examples include the Russian Federation and elsewhere in eastern Europe where the breakdown in public services has been accompanied by a resurgence of syphilis that is threatening to spread westwards across Europe. Thus, with changing social structures and economic patterns, particularly in large urban populations, adaptability to changing times would seem to hold the key to future prospects for disease control. Efforts for the 21st century should therefore aim to use variable strategies tailored to the characteristics of the populations in which syphilis is to be controlled, together with the maintenance of widespread serological screening.

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