



Global view

Syphilis screening programme in Athens, 1974–98

Introduction

Syphilis is a complex community disease, with multiple stages and unique presentations involving almost every organ system, and which can be controlled by public health measures.

The aim of this study was to analyse and report on the syphilis case finding programme as implemented through the dermatology clinic of Athens University.

Method

The syphilis screening and treatment programme took place between 09.00 to 12.00 on six days between 1 January 1974 and 31 December 1998. Primary, secondary, and early latent syphilis (referred to collectively as early syphilis) were defined using generally accepted criteria.¹ People were recruited for screening in "A Syngros" Hospital, Athens, then taken to the same hospital for further investigation and treatment. The principal screening tests for syphilis were the Venereal Disease Research Laboratory (VDRL) test and the rapid plasma reagin (RPR) test.² All positive cases were confirmed by treponema test TPHA or FTA.

Results

Table 1 shows the prevalence of detected syphilis cases for each year between 1974 and 1998 in both men and women. For men, all age strata remained stable from 1974 to 1991 followed by a sharp drop, the minimum occurring in 1996. In contrast, the positive women were on average younger than men.

Moreover, in 1991 and thereafter no differences were observed in age between male and female patients.

The number of patients with the primary stage of the disease was almost equal to the number of patients with the secondary stage of syphilis, whereas the other classified forms comprised only one seventh of the positive cases. Moreover, a high percentage of asymptomatic men (21.8%) and women (32.8%) was observed among the syphilis patients.

Discussion

During the past 25 years, it is estimated that affected men visited our department much more often because their symptoms were obvious and severe, whereas the observed small number of female patients could be the result of a self treatment, or for other reasons such as their occupation, fear of a social stigma, and/or a general unwillingness to be examined by a doctor.³

Additionally, the observed continuing decline of the incidence of the disease could be for the following reasons: (a) the better standard of living, (b) the use of a condom as a preventive measure against AIDS,⁴ (c) the higher education level, and/or (d) the opportunity of admission in a private venereal disease clinic.

Furthermore, the median age of the syphilis cases for both sexes showed a continuing decline which was discontinued during the years 1980–3 when an "immigration wave" from eastern Europe, especially from Russia, moved in Greece.⁵

The high percentage of early latent cases (which were asymptomatic) among the pa-

tients suggested that preventive measures reduced transmission, since asymptomatic men accounted for a disproportionate share of STD transmission⁶ and were unlikely to seek medical attention on their own.

Consideration should be given to using screening for long periods, repeating the programme in the same population at intervals to determine if a change in incidence occurs.

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Table 1 Syphilis screened subjects from 1974 to 1998 (25 years)

	Total screened			Syphilis cases	
	No	Males	Females	Males (%)	Females (%)
1974	63 081	36 625	26 456	(0.70)	(0.05)
1975	61 757	35 796	25 961	(0.67)	(0.12)
1976	65 797	37 828	27 969	(0.52)	(0.13)
1977	58 141	34 588	23 553	(0.45)	(0.12)
1978	70 278	40 483	29 795	(0.42)	(0.05)
1979	68 299	39 732	28 567	(0.71)	(0.07)
1980	74 726	40 766	33 960	(0.86)	(0.18)
1981	66 179	36 079	30 100	(0.60)	(0.11)
1982	70 694	35 007	35 687	(0.72)	(0.13)
1983	70 102	36 202	33 900	(0.54)	(0.07)
1984	72 420	37 220	35 200	(0.48)	(0.11)
1985	81 535	42 593	38 942	(0.44)	(0.12)
1986	84 310	43 152	41 158	(0.41)	(0.14)
1987	71 046	36 436	34 610	(0.40)	(0.09)
1988	41 011	19 681	21 330	(0.40)	(0.08)
1989	61 444	30 271	31 173	(0.23)	(0.09)
1990	59 900	29 202	30 698	(0.19)	(0.12)
1991	60 385	29 863	30 522	(0.10)	(0.04)
1992	60 105	29 608	30 497	(0.09)	(0.05)
1993	66 968	34 336	32 632	(0.03)	(0.03)
1994	63 984	30 628	33 356	(0.08)	(0.03)
1995	62 748	31 322	31 426	(0.04)	(0.03)
1996	58 584	29 244	29 340	(0.06)	(0.03)
1997	64 679	30 122	34 557	(0.09)	(0.04)
1998	65 650	32 095	33 555	(0.03)	(0.03)
Total	1 643 823	858 879	784 944	(0.468)	(0.084)
Grand total			1 643 823	(0.263)	