Perceived transmissibility of STIs: lack of differentiation between HIV and chlamydia

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs), such as HIV and chlamydia, differ widely in their transmissibility. The estimated probability of HIV transmission from an infected heterosexual man to a woman in one act of unprotected vaginal intercourse is 0.1%, whereas the same probability for chlamydia is 35%. This research examines college students’ knowledge about the per act transmission probabilities for HIV and chlamydia.

Previous studies reported median perceived transmission probabilities of 50% and 33.4% for HIV for one act of unprotected receptive vaginal intercourse with an infected man. These findings were interpreted as demonstrating “badly overestimated per act transmission probabilities” (Pinkerton et al. 1999). However, the distributions of the estimates were not provided. If estimates are widely dispersed across the entire probability range from 0% to 100%, interpretations of averages are meaningless and interpreting the data as indicating a systematic overestimation of the transmission probability would be unfounded. We studied this possibility in a sample of college students.

All 234 undergraduate university students (145 women, 89 men, mean age 21.14 years, SD 2.82; four did not report their age and sex) enrolled in a variety of academic programmes were randomly selected and individually approached after classes. Aside from their age and sex, participants were asked in two separate questions: “What do you think is the probability, in percentages, of a woman becoming infected with HIV (chlamydia) from one unprotected act of vaginal intercourse with an infected man?” The order in which people were asked the two questions was counterbalanced.

Figure 1 presents the distribution of the estimates, showing that they are widely and quite equally dispersed across the entire range from 0% to 100%, and that distributions do not differ between the two infections (Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z = −0.73, p = 0.46).

No age or sex differences were found. Only 3.9% and 5.6% of the estimates for HIV and chlamydia, respectively, come close to the correct probabilities if “correct” is defined as smaller than 0.5% for HIV and between 30% and 40% for chlamydia. In all, 34.8% of the participants falsely estimate that chlamydia has a lower transmission probability than HIV, 39.5% correctly estimate that chlamydia has a higher transmission probability than HIV, and 25.8% provide exactly the same percentage estimate for both STIs.

The data show that a large majority of college students clearly lacks knowledge of the transmission probabilities of HIV and chlamydia and does not know that chlamydia is more infectious than HIV. Previous reports of statistical averages of the perceived transmissibility and their interpretation as indicating a systematic overestimation bias may be unfounded. The results highlight the importance of inspecting response distributions and restraining from reporting statistical averages when distributions are widely dispersed. Furthermore, they highlight that information about transmission probabilities should be incorporated into sexual health programmes in order to make people more aware of STIs that are considerably easier to contract than HIV.

Acknowledgements

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Contributors

The study was jointly conceptualised and designed by BK and RK; data were collected by RK, with the assistance of Surkhraj Cheema; BK analysed the data and led the writing; both authors jointly interpreted the findings, reviewed drafts of the manuscript, and approved the final version.

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References


A new method for extended trichomonad storage

With the introduction of the InPouch test for Trichomonas vaginalis, T gallinae, and T foetus, it was desirable to have a procedure available for maintaining extended culture viability. The three trichomonads are viable after 8 days by subculture in the InPouch at 35°C. Extended viable storage of these three trichomonads is the subject of this letter.

We have evaluated various procedures involving freezing 24 hour InPouch cultures at −70°C. We now report a procedure that has demonstrated storage of viable trichomond cultures for more than 2 years.

The freshly subcultured trichomonads are incubated at 35°C for 24 hours, which should produce a viable count of approximately $1.0 \times 10^7$ cells/ml. It is important to note that subsequent subculture will require an adequate nutrient available for growth in the pouch. Then 0.1 ml of pure sterile glyceral is added to the medium in the pouch and thoroughly mixed employing the “shoe-shine” technique. It is important to immediately place the pouch in a −70°C freezer.

After freezing most of the trichomonads in the pouch are non-viable, but successful subculture is routinely achieved upon thawing. When the pouch is removed from the freezer, it should be immediately placed in an incubator at 35°C–37°C. After 3 days a few viable trichomonads will be observed, and after 4 days it may be subcultured.

This procedure has been effective for T vaginalis, T gallinae, and T foetus.

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Intriguing condition in a patient. The penis is unknown. We report this rather unique occurrence of fistulas leading to urethral tuberculosis is rare and its presentation with papulonecrotic tuberculid of the glans penis. The proximal part was devoid of any lesion. The testes, bilateral epididymis, and scrotum were normal. The discharge smear revealed Mycobacterium tuberculosis grew contaminants. A roentgenogram of the chest and perineum was unremarkable.

Penile involvement occurred secondary to urethral tuberculosis. The patient tolerated antituberculous treatment comprising isoniazid 300 mg, rifampicin 600 mg, pyrazinamide 1500 mg, and ethambutol 800 mg per day. The liver and renal functions were normal. The discharge smear stained with Gram stain and Ziehl-Neelsen stain. The Gram stained smear revealed numerous pus cells and acid fast stain showed abundant acid fast bacilli. Culture for Mycobacterium tuberculosis grew contaminants. A roentgenogram of abdomen and prostate was normal. Mantoux skin test was strongly positive (30 x 30 mm) (fig 2). His venereal disease research laboratory test (VDRL) and HIV serology was non-reactive.

Based on these clinical features, positive Mantoux test and acid fast bacilli in the urethral smear, the diagnosis of urethral tuberculosis with urethrococulastis fistula was made. The patient was started on antituberculous treatment comprising isoniazid 300 mg, rifampicin 600 mg, pyrazinamide 1500 mg, and ethambutol 800 mg per day. The patient showed marked improvement after 4 weeks of treatment. The sinuses closed and discharge ceased. Patient was referred to urology for management of stricture, which was planned after the antituberculous treatment. The patient tolerated antituberculous treatment and completed 9 months of treatment with remarkable recovery in the swelling of the penis.

Genital involvement occurs in 50% of male patients with urogenital tuberculosis. Penile tuberculosis is rare with less than 1% of patients having penile involvement. Tuberculosis of the penis usually presents as ulcers, tuberculous cavernitis, or nodules. In most cases, the lesion appears as a superficial, solitary, painless ulcer on the glans penis. It can be clinically indistinguishable from malignant disease. Rarely, lesions may persist as solid nodule or cavernositis with ulceration. Papulonecrotic tuberculid may also present as an ulcer on the penis. Penile involvement may occur secondary to co-existing urinary tract tuberculosis. The transmission occurs secondary to bacilluria in these patients. Infection of the penis may occur by direct contact at the time of intercourse with a partner having urogenital tuberculosis.

Tuberculosis of male urethra is an uncommon condition and presents as urethral strictures, periurethral abscesses, or fistula formation. Fistulas can occur in the perineum leading on to “water can” perineum. Similar occurrence of fistulas in penis can also occur as “water can” penis. In our case, penile involvement occurred secondary to urethral tuberculosis. Such involvement of the penis by tuberculosis is unique and not reported in the literature. “Water can perineum” is also known to occur with gonorrhea but our patient had a negative urethral smear for Gram negative diplococci and had features suggestive of urethral tuberculosis. Further, the strictures, fistulas, and lymphocoelema led to “saxophone” deformity of the penis. Such deformity is well known with lymphogranuloma venereum, but is unknown in tuberculosis.

**References**


**South Asians with HIV in London:** is it time to rethink sexual health service delivery to meet the needs of heterosexual ethnic minorities?

Recent conservative estimates suggest that at the end of 2002, 4.8 million people were living with HIV/AIDS in south Asia including 4.58 million in India. In the United Kingdom there are estimated to be 1.5 million people of south Asian ethnicity. While the National Strategy for Sexual Health aims to improve health care in those who have HIV through earlier diagnosis, studies have shown that other ethnic minority groups present with advanced disease and not through routine genitourinary medicine (GUM) screening. We studied the case notes of all adults self-defining as Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Sri Lankan ethnicity diagnosed HIV positive from South Asians in London.
January 1985 to December 2002 attending four HIV treatment centres in London. Information was collected on demography, mode of first presentation, and clinical stage of HIV infection.

In all, 117 patients were identified, 30 women and 87 men. The number of new diagnoses among south Asians increased by more than threefold over the period 1996 to 2002 compared to earlier years (25 diagnoses before 1996, 90 diagnosed from 1996–2002).

The median age at diagnosis was 38 years (range 19–64 years) for men and 28 years (range 20–53 years) for women. Forty-five patients (38%) had originated from Africa, 28 (24%) from India, and 18 (15%) from the United Kingdom. The majority were of Indian ethnicity (95/117; 81%) with the next largest ethnic group being Sri Lankan (12/117; 10%).

The primary mode of transmission was heterosexual sex (72/117; 62%) with transmission through sex between men accounting for a further 31% (36/117) of cases. Four infections were acquired through blood transfusion, two through injecting drug use, one from a needle stick injury, and in two cases risk behaviour could not be identified.

The majority (39%, 45/117) of patients identified Africa as the probable place of infection with 28% and 15% probably infected in the United Kingdom and India, respectively.

There were substantial differences in the reasons for testing between individuals in the main risk groups. In particular, heterosexual men and women were both significantly less likely than homosexual men to be diagnosed via routine attendance at a GUM clinic (2% and 3%, respectively, compared to 5% and 4%, respectively, p < 0.001, Fisher’s exact test). Among heterosexuals, the main reason for testing in men was symptomatic HIV infection/AIDS (60% of men but only 26% of women), whereas women were more likely to be tested through partner notification of a known HIV+ sexual contact (44% vs 7% in males) (table 1).

The median CD4 count at presentation overall was 300 (range 3–1104) cells $\times 10^3/\mu l$; however, male heterosexuals presented with significantly lower CD4 counts (median 178, range 3–1023 cells $\times 10^3/\mu l$) than either homosexual men (median 381, range 4–810 cells $\times 10^3/\mu l$; p = 0.01) or heterosexual women (median 377, range 10–1104; p = 0.02).

While there are methodological limitations with retrospective case note reviews and differing reporting categories used for Asian ethnicity, our data confirm national surveillance reports of increasing HIV infection among Britain’s south Asian communities.7 The four centres taking part in this study reported 90 cases from 1996–2002 representing one in three of all HIV positive south Asians reported in this time period. Despite the fact that the majority of these were not diagnosed through routine GUM screening the median CD4 count at presentation of heterosexual and homosexual men was consistent with national trends.7 Indeed, south Asian women presented higher CD4 counts than seen nationally, primarily attributable to effective partner notification. While south Asians still represent less than 5% of all reported HIV positive diagnoses in UK ethnic minority groups7 (Asians 334; black Africans 8848; black Caribbean 844) numbers are likely to continue to increase in the future and methods for encouraging early presentation need to be developed in response to this.

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References

Failure to maintain patient access to GUM clinics

We read with interest the article published by Cassell et al8 about the maintenance of patient access to genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics following a switch to an appointment based system. Their data show no significant change in the age, ethnic mix, symptom status and disease mix following the change to appointments. In addition, such a system of 35% prebooked appointments produced an increase in the number of patients seen over that time.

A new appointment based system was introduced at the John Hunter genitourinary medicine clinic at the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital in October 2001. This comprised 80% of appointments which were prebooked with a further 20% allocated on the day following triage by a nurse. All patients with symptoms were seen on the day of presentation.

We have analysed the results from two 9 month periods, taken immediately before the change and 3 months after the introduction of an appointment based system. The total number of patients and sex ratio seen

Table 1 Total number of STI diagnoses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Total number of STI diagnoses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jan-Sep 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total no of patients attending</td>
<td>11714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patients new to clinic</td>
<td>5191 (44.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2  Details of STIs diagnosed in men and women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>37 (0.5)</td>
<td>53 (0.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>262 (3.8)</td>
<td>190 (2.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4a/C4c</td>
<td>244 (3.5)</td>
<td>179 (2.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4h</td>
<td>683 (9.9)</td>
<td>479 (7.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C10a</td>
<td>89 (1.3)</td>
<td>55 (0.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C11a</td>
<td>264 (3.8)</td>
<td>254 (3.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total diagnosed with an STI at this episode</td>
<td>1579 (22.8)</td>
<td>1210 (18.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p Value using $\chi^2$ test with Yates’ correction.

(A1) Primary diagnosis of syphilis; (B1) gonorrhoea; (C4a, C4c) uncomplicated chlamydia; (C4h) non-gonococcal urethritis; (C10a) first attack of genital herpes; (C11a) anogenital warts.

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Prevalence of HSV-1/HSV-2 antibodies in HIV seropositive patients in Coventry, United Kingdom

The seroprevalence of herpes simplex virus (HSV) antibody among HIV patients within the United Kingdom is unknown. We therefore conducted a HSV seroprevalence study in HIV patients attending our genitourinary medicine clinic from January 2000 to December 2001. Our previous study revealed an overall prevalence of HSV-1 (60%), HSV-2 (20%), and both HSV-1 and HSV-2 (12%) among male and female genital herpes clinic attendees who were either HIV negative or whose HIV status was unknown.

Serum samples from 96 consecutive ethnically diverse HIV patients were collected during routine investigations, and tested for HSV type specific antibodies by monoclonal antibody blocking enzyme linked immunosorbent assay. Out of 96 patients, two HSV-1 and three HSV-2 antibody test results were equivocal in four individuals. These were excluded from the analysis and results are presented here for 92 patients.

There were 56 men and 36 women in the study; 46 (50%) were white, 43 (47%) black African, and three were from other ethnic groups. All the black Africans were heterosexuals and 71% of men were homosexuals. The median age was 35 years (range 21–80).

HSV-1 seroprevalence was 86% among men and 97% among women ($p = 0.14$). HSV-2 seroprevalence was 50% among men whereas it was 94% among women ($p = 0.0001$). There was no statistically significant difference between the seroprevalence of HSV-1 between white and black people. However, seroprevalence of HSV-2 and both serotypes was significantly higher among black than among white people.

This study shows very high seroprevalence of HSV-1 (90%), HSV-2 (67%), and both HSV-1 and HSV-2 (64%) among our HIV positive cohort in Coventry. The high prevalence of HSV-2 in women is possibly because most of them were black and acquired HIV through sex. These findings may have important public health implications as the high rate of HSV-2 is therefore likely to act as a cofactor in HIV transmission.

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References


Effective Sexual Health Interventions: Issues In Experimental Evaluation


HIV spreads more every day and there are epidemics of other STIs in both the developed and developing world at least in part because the fear of HIV appears to be receding in the population. Our current strategies to contain these problems are meeting with limited success and treatment of people who are already infected, important though that is in controlling bacterial infections, is much less effective with continuing viral infections. There is an urgent need to develop and to test better

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methods of helping people to reduce their risky sexual behaviour.

This book is excellent, brief, fairly comprehensive, and very readable. Its focus is designing studies on the effectiveness of sexual health interventions. If we are to get anywhere in improving behavioural interventions it is essential that what is done is carefully evaluated.

The first three chapters of the book are concerned with methodology, particularly whether randomised controlled (RCTs) trials are an appropriate method for evaluating interventions in this area. While this section of the book is well argued on all sides it doesn’t really break any new ground. The strengths and weaknesses of RCTs in behaviour change are pretty much what they are in any other area of medicine. Methodologies don’t exist as stand alone phenomena, whether an RCT or some other methodology is appropriate depends simply on what question one is seeking to answer.

The second section of the book covers models of behaviour change and the choice of design and outcome measures. It is clear that one of the main problems in intervening in sexual health is the poor quality of the available psychological models and our real lack of understanding about why people behave as they do. Without understanding why people behave as they do it is difficult to help them to change. It is interesting that models of health behaviour never seem to get discarded, even the ones that are known to be weak. There are particularly strong chapters on cluster randomisation, an approach which probably gives rise to more inappropriate phenomena, whether an RCT or some other methodology is appropriate depends simply on what question one is seeking to answer.

The book ends by looking at generalisability in its broadest sense. Generalisability is an area that tends to get overlooked. Even a highly successful behaviour change programme would be of no use in developing countries if it was labour intensive and dependent on highly skilled staff for its delivery.

I would recommend this book to anyone planning a trial or simply seeking to understand the existing literature. I would however caution that to make sense of it you will have to look at some of the available reviews of the behaviour change literature since the book assumes some knowledge, or willingness to acquire knowledge, of these.

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CORRECTIONS


The authors of a letter in the December issue of STI (Dave SS, Johnson AM, Fenton KA, Mercer CH, Erens B, Wellings K. Male circumcision in Britain: findings from a national probability sample survey. Sex Transm Infect 2003; 79:499–500) were listed in the wrong order. The correct author list should be as follows: Dave SS, Fenton KA, Mercer CH, Erens B, Wellings K, Johnson AM.

In the corresponding author’s address of a letter published in the December issue (Bhatia R, Prabhakar S, Shedde D, et al. Coexistent cranial tuberculomas and tuberculosis of the cervix in a postmenopausal woman. Sex Transm Infect 2003; 79:496–7) All India Institute of Medical Sciences was incorrectly printed as AU India Institute of Medical Sciences.