


Continuing evidence that COVID-19 has influenced syphilis epidemiology in Rome

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There are conflicting data on how COVID-19 has impacted STI epidemiology worldwide.¹ In Rome, we observed a marked decrease in syphilis diagnoses during the first lockdown of spring 2020.² Extending our previous observations, we compared syphilis diagnoses (primary/secondary/recent) during the whole of 2020 versus those of the previous 3 years (figure 1). While diagnoses by month were homogeneous in the pre-pandemic period (p for trend=0.40), 2020 showed a peak in June, a sharp and atypical decline in September, returning to the usual figures in November, when Rome was in 'soft' lockdown. We speculate that the increase in June might reflect: (1) visit postponement by patients who, despite being symptomatic, were reluctant to attend the hospital; (2) diagnoses of infections acquired during lockdown. Overall, syphilis diagnoses were 81 in 2020 compared with mean 106 (SE: 7) in 2017–2019 suggesting, to some extent, a reduction of at-risk sexual encounters in the pandemic period.

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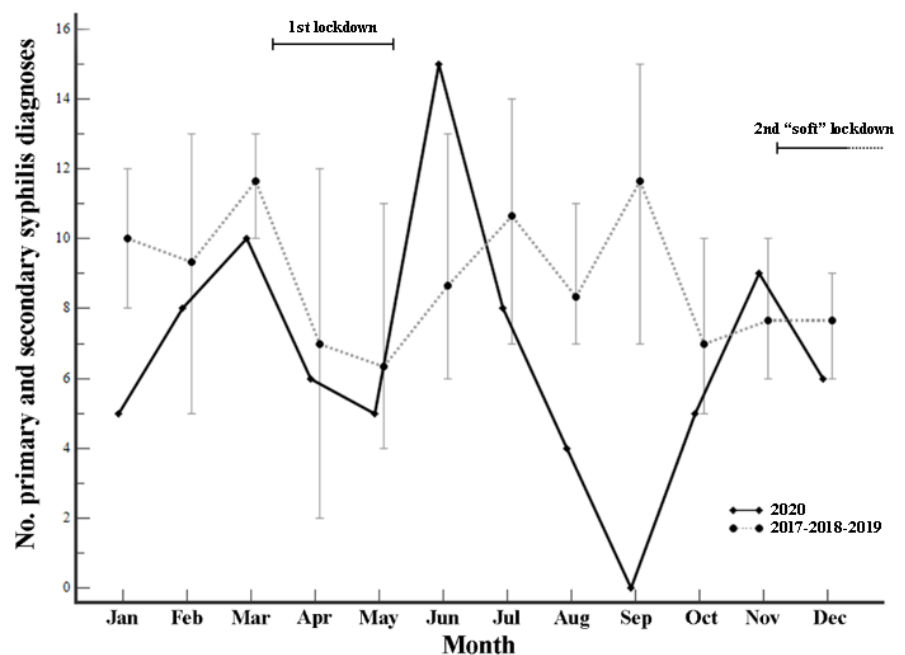


Figure 1 Number of infectious syphilis (primary/secondary/recent syphilis), by month, diagnosed at the STI/HIV Unit of the San Gallicano Dermatological Institute (Rome, Italy), during the pandemic year (2020) and mean number (with range) of infectious syphilis, by month, diagnosed in the pre-pandemic period (2017–2019); the first strict lockdown and the second 'soft' lockdown (when Rome was in the low-risk yellow zone) are also indicated. (Created by the authors.)