

New chlamydia and gonorrhoea testing and treatment programmes

Nicole Gooch (SPC)



People living in the Cook Islands, Nauru and Solomon Islands are now able to access simple testing and treatment for chlamydia, a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that, if left untreated, can lead to increased risk of infertility or early miscarriage.

The Cook Islands Te Marae Ora Ministry of Health is leading the way with a 12-month pilot programme to enable access to testing and treatment for chlamydia and gonorrhoea.

SPC's HIV & STI Section and Public Health Surveillance & Communicable Disease Control (PHS&CDC) Section are providing support to the three countries with funding from the Asian Development Bank.

Testing and treatment have become much simpler and more affordable in recent years with the availability of accurate tests that can be used simply on urine samples, and single-dose antibiotic treatment.

In the Cook Islands, chlamydia testing occurred for a period a few years ago but ceased due to high costs. More recently, a survey revealed high rates of chlamydia infection among pregnant women.

'This led to the Ministry exploring opportunities to respond to the issue urgently,' says Cook Islands Secretary of Health Dr Roro Daniel. 'These findings probably represent only the tip of the iceberg, so we need to do everything possible to immediately reduce chlamydia infection incidence and prevalence

and therefore reproductive health tract complications, particularly among our women.'

The new testing uses a technology that relies on detecting the DNA of the organism. It is often called PCR (polymerase chain reaction), NAAT (nucleic acid amplification testing) or DNA probe testing. This type of testing is very accurate. It also means that people can be tested without having a genital examination. Men and women are tested with a urine sample or, if women prefer, they can collect their own vaginal swab. The specimens are tested for both chlamydia and gonorrhoea. Testing can be done confidentially using a code instead of the patient's name on the specimen.

Testing is aimed at any sexually active person aged up to 30 years

as well as all women attending antenatal clinics. Any person with symptoms that may be caused by an STI, such as discharge from the penis, discomfort when passing urine, vaginal discharge or lower abdominal pain in women, should also be tested. Treatment involves the administration of just one tablet.

A chlamydia and gonorrhoea testing and treatment pilot is also planned for Solomon Islands in 2008. Funding available through the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GFATM) will support testing and treatment in the Cook Islands

and Solomon Islands beyond the pilots, as well as implementation of testing and treatment in other Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) starting in the second half of 2008.

For more information on second-generation surveillance, go to:
<http://www.spc.int/hiv/downloads/second-generation-surveillance-surveys/>

For more information on STI testing programmes, contact Anna McNulty, STI Adviser, HIV & STI Section, SPC,
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Chlamydia - the most common STI in the Pacific

Second-generation surveillance (SGS) studies conducted in the last few years in several PICTs identified very high rates of chlamydia infection, particularly among those aged 15-30. In most men and women chlamydia does not have any symptoms or has only mild symptoms, such as discharge or lower abdominal pain in women, which often go unnoticed. Improving access to testing will make it easier to obtain an accurate diagnosis and provide opportunities for treatment with the appropriate antibiotic.

Chlamydia and gonorrhoea are different STIs that cause the same problems

- *Chlamydia and gonorrhoea are most common among those aged 15-30.*
- *In many PICTs, up to 20% of people aged 15-30 may be infected.*
- *Most men and women have no symptoms and are unaware that they are infected.*
- *People can remain infectious for up to two years.*
- *Chlamydia and gonorrhoea are easily transmitted through unprotected sex.*
- *Properly using a condom during sex provides very good protection against infection.*
- *Symptoms in men include pain, stinging or burning when passing urine, and/or discharge from the penis.*
- *Symptoms in women include discharge, bleeding in between periods, and lower abdominal pain (like period pain).*
- *Untreated infection can lead to increased risk of infertility, tubal pregnancy, early miscarriage, premature labour and infection of babies during delivery.*
- *Chlamydia is easy to test for (urine sample) and easy to treat (single-dose antibiotic treatment).*
- *Partners need to be treated to prevent re-infection.*
- *Chlamydia and gonorrhoea increase the risk of HIV transmission.*



Solomon Islands health professionals improve counselling skills for HIV testing

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Twenty Solomon Islands health professionals have completed two weeks of training in counselling skills for HIV testing. The training took place in Honiara, with participants including doctors, midwives, nurses and prison and laboratory staff working for government and non-government services in various provinces of the country.

‘Many people in the Pacific who want to have an HIV test are concerned about the negative and judgemental treatment they might experience from some health services,’ says Alistair Mac Donald, Counselling Training Officer in SPC’s HIV & STI Section. With improved training and regular professional support for those providing HIV and other STI services, Mr Mac Donald hopes to see the negative reports of people’s experience of HIV and STI testing become a thing of the past.

Mr Mac Donald says that it is common to feel anxious, ashamed or guilty or be worried about blame in having a test, but ‘if people know that they will be treated respectfully and professionally by the health worker they see, no matter what their background or reasons for



Actors help out during the training in Honiara

seeking testing services, then they may feel more willing or able to seek out these services when they need them’.

HIV testing has long been recognised as a crucial step to successfully preventing HIV infections and, for those living with HIV, access to care and life-saving treatment. Mr Mac Donald stated that health-care workers ensuring patient privacy, confidentiality and informed consent to test for HIV or other STIs is not just essential if Solomon Islands is to encourage more people to test, ‘but also a basic human right’.

‘Providing user-friendly and effective HIV and STI test counselling presents many challenges,’ says Dr Tenneth

Dalipanda, Chief of Internal Medicine and Medical Superintendent of the National Referral Hospital in Honiara. ‘These include considerable technical knowledge and a high level of skill and sensitivity from health professionals in discussing difficult and sensitive issues such as sexual behaviour, relationships and the stigma and discrimination commonly associated with HIV and other STIs.’

Presenting at the workshop, Dr Dalipanda and Mr Mac Donald expressed a shared concern that currently many of those infected with HIV in Pacific countries do not get tested until very late – often not until they have become ill and cannot ignore what is happening to them. Dr Dalipanda stresses that ‘through improved

training such as the recent programme on counselling skills for health professionals, and positive changes in attitudes and practice, there will be one less barrier for those who want to get tested or seek assistance’.

To focus HIV and STI support and services where they are needed most, the Solomon Islands Ministry of Health, with the support of SPC, is about to embark on surveying specific populations in Solomon Islands to better understand prevalence rates of HIV and other STIs, and to learn more about risk behaviours for these conditions. Dr Dalipanda explains that ‘this



training in counselling for HIV testing is therefore timely and necessary so that the Ministry of Health is able to undertake the HIV tests and collect the data needed as part of the surveillance’.

The first round of surveillance in Solomon Islands was undertaken in 2004–2005 and found high levels of other STIs, particularly chlamydia among pregnant women. This usually means that a disease is endemic in the broader community. It also found high levels of unsafe sex (no condom use) among the youth interviewed. This all means that there is a potential for HIV to spread rapidly once it takes hold.

To find out more, contact:

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Counselling training in Niue

Fifteen Niue health workers, including doctors, nurses and midwives, also took part recently in an introductory programme on counselling related to HIV and other STI tests. The programme for hospital-based staff was held in Niue.

The four-day interactive workshop was facilitated by Alistair Mac Donald from SPC’s HIV & STI Section. It was officially opened and closed by Niue’s premier, the Honorable Young Vivian, whose presence underscored his government’s commitment to preventing the spread of HIV infection in Niue, a Pacific country that has yet to report a case of the infection. But in closing the meeting, the premier commented that ‘it would only be a matter of time’ before Niue reported its first HIV case.

Premier Vivian noted that Niue citizens of all ages are highly mobile, with many undertaking regular international travel. This, coupled with the Pacific

region’s relatively high levels of other STIs and risk behaviours, leaves many people vulnerable to infection with HIV.

The workshop was the first part of a two-stage training programme presenting the latest information on HIV and other STIs, their transmission, and the skills that a health professional needs to effectively counsel a person on testing for HIV antibodies and other STIs.

The second part of the HIV and other STIs test counselling training programme will further develop the skills of the participating health professionals. The Niue Health Department hopes that the availability of well-trained and supportive staff will encourage people who are concerned about HIV or other STIs to feel more able to seek help and advice at Niue’s Fouu Hospital.

Pacific Islands HIV and STI Response Fund

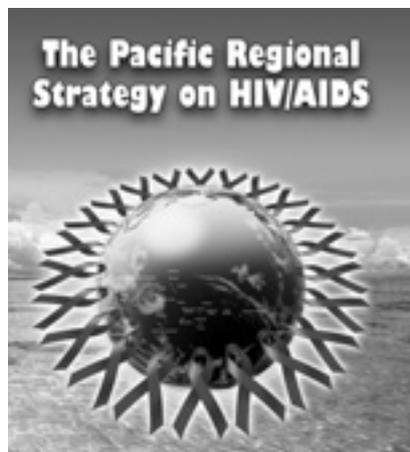
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On his recent visit to Solomon Islands, the Prime Minister of Australia, Mr Kevin Rudd, announced that the Australian Government will commit \$30 million over a five-year period to the establishment of the 'Pacific Islands HIV and Sexually Transmitted Infections Response Fund'.

Dr Jimmie Rodgers, Director-General of SPC, welcomed the announcement, saying, 'Australia's commitment to scale up and sustain efforts to effectively address HIV and other STI issues in the Pacific through the HIV and STI Response Fund is remarkable. SPC applauds Australia's commitment and this recognition that urgent action is needed to prevent HIV taking hold in the region.'

The Response Fund complements other funding received separately from France, New Zealand, GFATM and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). It is designed to help PICTs implement their own national strategies on HIV and other STIs as well as national components of the Pacific Regional Strategy on HIV and other STIs, 2009–2013.

Dr Rodgers added that he hoped the Response Fund would provide



a platform for further contributions from other current donors, such as New Zealand and France.

The Response Fund will continue to support some of the activities currently being implemented through the Australian-funded Pacific Regional HIV/AIDS Project (PRHP) based in Suva, Fiji. This includes specific grants for civil society organisations and support for capacity development organisations. It will also include, for the first time, annual allocations for PICTs to help support the implementation of their national plans for preventing HIV and other STIs.

The establishment of the Response Fund follows the approval by Pacific Islands Forum leaders at their meeting in Tonga in 2007 of the extension of the current Pacific Regional Strategy on HIV. The strategy has been amended to strengthen the focus on emerging

trends, such as the increasing incidence of other STIs.

The Response Fund will be managed by SPC and overseen by an independent fund committee. It is separate to the funding provided to Papua New Guinea.

The Pacific region's experience of HIV is unique. In Papua New Guinea, the largest country in the region, HIV infection rates have reached epidemic levels. In other PICTs, HIV prevalence is generally low, but research shows that numerous risk factors exist, indicating the potential for rapid spread of the virus. Major challenges that need to be addressed urgently in the region include high rates of STIs, gender inequality and high levels of gender-based violence, discrimination against people living with HIV, limited access to prevention, counselling and treatment services, and the need to better coordinate the delivery of these services.

For more information on the HIV and STI Response Fund or the Pacific Regional Strategy on HIV and other STIs, email NicoleG@spc.int, or go to the website: <http://www.spc.int/hiv/regional-strategy-on-hiv/>