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## SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES/HEPATITIS IN THE PACIFIC

### SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES IN THE PACIFIC

There are over 20 different sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including gonorrhoea, syphilis, chlamydia, AIDS, herpes and genital warts.

#### HOW COMMON ARE STDs IN THE PACIFIC?

There is currently a world-wide epidemic of these diseases and the Pacific island region has not escaped this epidemic.

It is very difficult to get accurate statistics on STDs in the Pacific island region, as these diseases are believed to be greatly under-reported. This is because:

- Health clinics may not be available where people can be tested and treated for STDs, especially in the rural areas;
- People are often too ashamed to go to public health clinics and instead try to cure themselves with various medicines, or go to traditional healers or private doctors who often do not report cases to public health authorities;
- People with STDs often are not aware that they are infected. This is especially true of women, who often have no noticeable symptoms until the later stages of the disease;
- Many STDs, including chlamydia and herpes are not official notifiable diseases. In most countries in the region, only gonorrhoea, syphilis, and AIDS must be reported to health departments.

Because of the under-reporting of STDs, the actual number of cases in the region is likely to be many times more than the reported number. Nonetheless, gonorrhoea was the **THIRD** most common notifiable disease in 5 of the countries that reported to the SPC in

1986 and the **SECOND** most common in one Pacific island country. Syphilis was the **THIRD** most common notifiable disease reported in one country.

The rates of STDs are apparently increasing in many Pacific island countries. These diseases are most common in people aged 15 to 24 years who live in urban areas. Some reasons given for the increase in STDs are: increasing migration to cities and towns, the growth in the young population in most countries, the break with traditional cultures as people move to urban areas, and the growing influence of Western culture through films and other media.

#### THE DANGERS OF STDs

STDs are infectious diseases caused by micro-organisms such as bacteria and viruses. Some STDs, including gonorrhoea, syphilis and chlamydia, can be completely cured with antibiotics, such as penicillin. For other STDs, including AIDS and herpes, there is no cure at present.

There are as yet no vaccines to prevent STDs, and people can be infected again and again. Strains of gonorrhoea which are resistant to penicillin are also a problem in the Pacific and require expensive drugs to cure.

STDs can have **very serious consequences**. AIDS is fatal, and syphilis, if left untreated, attacks the body's major organs and systems, and can lead to sterility, blindness, insanity and ultimately death.

Gonorrhoea and chlamydia can cause sterility in men and **Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (P.I.D.)** in women, which often leads to infertility, tubal pregnancies (a major cause of maternal mortality in many countries), and life-threatening major pelvic infection.

STDs in pregnant women can result in miscarriages, stillbirths and prematurity. **Babies** born to mothers infected with gonorrhoea or chlamydia often have conjunctivitis, an eye infection that is a major cause of blindness in newborn babies. Chlamydia can also cause infant pneumonia. Herpes infection can result in brain damage and infant death, and congenital syphilis usually leads to an early death. Herpes and genital warts have also been linked to **cervical cancer**.

STDs are all the more dangerous in women because they often have fewer noticeable symptoms than men, and thus often do not seek treatment or discover that they are infected until they are already infertile or seriously ill from P.I.D.

### PROTECTION AGAINST STDS

The risk factors for STDs include: having many sexual partners, having partners who have had many sexual relationships, and not using a condom during intercourse.

People can therefore protect themselves from STDs by practising 'safer sex' (SS), including:

- having one steady partner;
- knowing their partner well and avoiding relationships with people who have had many sexual partners;
- using a condom.

### HOW CAN WE CONTROL THE SPREAD OF STDS IN THE PACIFIC?

Controlling the spread of STDs requires governments to recognise that there is an STD problem in their countries and to be willing to deal with it effectively. Politicians and other community leaders need to be educated on the potential threat of AIDS in the Pacific. Health department and other social services staff may need to collect data, through improved routine data collection or through special clinic-based surveys to increase awareness of the problem and to help plan an effective control programme.

An STD/AIDS control programme should include:

- a comprehensive **public education programme** to inform people of the prevalence and dangers of STDs/AIDS and ways to protect oneself from these infections;
- **pre-natal screening** of all pregnant women for STDs;
- a **blood screening** programme for all donated blood, for AIDS, syphilis and hepatitis B;
- facilities to **test and treat STDs** in a primary health care setting, including laboratory equipment and training for health workers, lab technicians, etc.;
- the **tracing** and treatment of all **sexual contacts** of STD patients.

The key to STD prevention and control is a public education programme to reach a variety of different **target groups**, including school children, parents, military personnel and hard-to-reach groups, such as prostitutes, homosexuals and sexually active young people, in addition to the general public.

Creative ways must be found to effectively reach these groups through such '**outreach**' activities as radio campaigns, distributing educational materials in discos and bars, organising seminars in the military forces and with youth groups, training traditional healers, midwives and other health workers so that they can educate the community.

Education programmes should also involve the active participation of a **wide range of interested groups**, such as women's organisations, church groups, youth groups, parents, and teachers. Each country needs to develop its own public education programme that is tailored to the specific culture(s), the extent of the problem in the country and the high risk groups involved.

## HEPATITIS IN THE PACIFIC

### WHAT IS HEPATITIS?

Hepatitis is an infection of the liver. The most common types of hepatitis in the Pacific are infectious hepatitis A and B. They are different in the seriousness of the illness and how they are spread in the population.

### HEPATITIS A:

Hepatitis A is caused by the hepatitis A virus and is a very common disease in the Pacific.

#### How is it spread?

The hepatitis A virus is found mainly in the stool and blood of an infected person. It may be spread from an infected person to another person in the following ways:

- Through eating or drinking food and water contaminated with stool containing the hepatitis A virus;
- Although very rare, through a blood transfusion or reusing needles from an infected person.

#### Who gets Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a disease that is usually spread in epidemics in the Pacific islands. Most people are infected once in their lives through these epidemics. People who are at risk of becoming infected with hepatitis A include:

- Children and young adults;
- People living in areas with poor sewage disposal and unprotected drinking water;
- People living in crowded conditions.

#### What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

The symptoms of hepatitis A vary. They include:

- Fever
- Tiredness
- Nausea and loss of appetite
- Jaundice (yellow skin and eyes)
- Dark urine.

Many people (especially children) who become infected with hepatitis A may have very mild symptoms or no symptoms at all and may not feel or look sick. Nearly all people recover from the disease after a few months and develop long-term protection against hepatitis A.

#### How is Hepatitis A prevented?

There is no cure for hepatitis A illness. No vaccine yet exists that will provide long-term protection to people who have not yet been infected with hepatitis A.

Prevention of hepatitis A requires:

- Frequent hand washing with soap;
- Sanitary disposal of feces;
- Protection of drinking water from contamination;
- Personal hygiene and clean environment.

### HEPATITIS B:

Hepatitis B is more serious than hepatitis A. It is caused by the hepatitis B virus and can cause liver cancer.

#### How is it spread?

The hepatitis B virus is found in the blood, saliva, tears, semen, vaginal fluids, breast milk and other body fluids of an infected person. It may be spread from an infected person to another person in the following ways:

- From mother to baby, usually during birth;
- Through contact with contaminated blood and open wounds;
- Through close contact amongst household members;
- Through sexual contact;
- Through use of unsterilised needles in practices such as acupuncture, tattooing, ear-piercing, and illegal drug use;
- Through blood transfusions of untested blood.

### Who gets hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a disease which affects most people in the Pacific. Studies have shown that in many Pacific islands, more than half, and in some places almost all of the people, have been infected at some time in their life.

People who are at risk of becoming infected with hepatitis B include:

- Children and young adults in close contact with hepatitis B carriers in their household or at school;
- Babies born to women infected with hepatitis B;
- Persons with multiple sex partners;
- People receiving blood transfusions in places where blood is not tested for hepatitis B;
- People exposed to blood through their work (for example: dentists, health care workers, laboratory technicians);
- Homosexual and bisexual men;
- Drug users who share needles to inject illegal drugs.

### What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

The symptoms of hepatitis B vary. They include:

- Loss of appetite and nausea
- Jaundice (yellow skin and eyes)
- Fever
- Tiredness
- Vomiting and abdominal pain
- Dark urine.

Some people (especially children) who become infected with hepatitis B may have no symptoms and may not feel or look sick. Some people recover from the disease after a few months and develop protection against hepatitis B. Others become CARRIERS and carry the virus in their bodies for years or for life. **A hepatitis carrier may not feel sick but can still pass the hepatitis B infection on to**

**others.** In the Pacific around 10 per cent or more of the population are carriers of the hepatitis B virus.

A blood test can show if a person is infected with the hepatitis B virus.

### Hepatitis B is a serious health problem

A person with hepatitis B should be under the care of a doctor. Chronic carriers, especially those infected at a young age, may later develop serious liver diseases such as cirrhosis and liver cancer. Although largely under-reported, liver cancer represents more than 10 per cent of all cancers in the Pacific.

### Hepatitis B can be prevented

Since hepatitis B infection usually occurs during childhood, immunisation is the method of choice for its prevention. Amongst adults who have not yet been infected, immunisation is recommended when possible; otherwise, general rules involve:

- safer sexual practices (SS) using condoms and avoiding multiple partners;
- use of sterile disposable equipment when receiving injections.

It must be noted that the same rules also apply to the prevention of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

**There is a vaccine now available to protect people who have not yet been infected with the hepatitis B virus.**

It is strongly recommended that, in countries with high levels of hepatitis B infection such as in the Pacific, all newborn children be immunised as soon as possible after birth. The new hepatitis B vaccine should now be added to the existing Expanded Programme of Immunisation (EPI) which already includes BCG, DPT, poliomyelitis, and measles. Mass production of this vaccine has now dramatically reduced its cost.

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