

Letter to the Editor

Hepatitis A - the neglected sexually transmissible disease

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To the Editor: Dore and Kaldor provide valuable guidance on the directions a coordinated national system for surveillance of sexually transmissible diseases (STD) might take.¹ They did not attempt to provide an outline of what diseases might fall into this group, or what data should be collected for each disease, although a recent review of a decade of STD surveillance in Victoria examined data on syphilis, gonorrhoea, chlamydia, genital herpes, genital warts, hepatitis B, chancroid, lymphogranuloma venereum and donovanosis.²

However, it would seem timely to draw attention again to hepatitis A as a sexually transmissible disease, at least in some urban populations. The epicentre of a prolonged epidemic of hepatitis A in 1991-92 among homosexual men, was the gay community of the inner Sydney suburbs. A crude incidence of 136 cases per 100,000 population was recorded for 1991 in eastern Sydney, compared to 13

per 100,000 for Australia as a whole.³ The same epidemic was observed in Melbourne⁴ and simultaneously in other cities around the world.⁵ A similar, though smaller, epidemic occurred in 1995-96 in Sydney.

At the onset of the 1991-92 epidemic, the then Eastern Sydney Public Health Unit established a standalone hepatitis A database where risk factor information, in particular sexual preference, was kept in de-identified format. Maintenance of the database through subsequent epidemics in other risk groups^{6,7} has been invaluable in helping direct prevention activities, including education regarding hygiene and appropriate use of normal human immunoglobulin and hepatitis A vaccine. Analysis of the data revealed that during the 1991-92 and 1995-96 epidemics, adult males comprised almost 90% of all cases. This led to a peak incidence among young males, approaching 500 cases per 100,000 (or 0.5%) per year. Information on sexual preference was recorded in 75% of adult males, and of these, men who have sex with men contributed 80-90% of cases. In Australian cities, hepatitis A appears to behave as a sexually transmissible disease, and its proper surveillance requires collection of comprehensive risk factor data including sexual preference.

References

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