

INCENTIVES FOR STI TESTING? IMPACT AND CHALLENGES IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

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Background:

In Australia, sexually transmissible infections (STIs) are an important area of health disadvantage. National strategy documents highlight adolescents and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as priority populations. STI screening is a key strategy for detecting infections to ensure treatment and prevent onward transmission. We hypothesized that providing a financial incentive may encourage young people who might not otherwise attend the clinic to present for STI screening.

Methods:

The More Options for STI testing (MOST) trial was carried out from 2015 to 2020 in partnership with Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (CAAC). Participants were eligible for an incentive (a \$30 phone voucher) if they were aged 16-29 years and underwent a test for bacterial STIs at one of the seven clinical sites auspiced by CAAC. The primary outcome was the number of tests conducted in the eligible age group, comparing the baseline and intervention periods.

Results:

The impact of the incentives on STI testing uptake was negligible. The number of STI tests among women was threefold that of men across all study phases. During the incentives phase, there were 5,110 clinic visits for an STI test, 1,526 of which received an incentive. An incentive was provided in 36% to 76% of eligible visits per month. During the COVID-19 pandemic, STI screening decreased among all groups.

Conclusion:

Our study showed a lack of impact of an incentive program on increasing STI screening among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in central Australia. Possible explanations include: the low coverage of distribution of the incentive, lack of community awareness of the incentive, or the incentive may not have provided enough motivation to overcome barriers to STI testing. Future studies should determine suitability of incentives for the setting and population group, or consider alternative methods that complement the use of an incentives program.

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