

OUTBREAK OF INFECTIOUS SYPHILIS IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY OF AUSTRALIA, NO DOWNFALL YET!

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Introduction:

An infectious syphilis outbreak was declared in the Northern Territory in 2014 starting in Alice Springs, reaching the Barkly, Katherine, East Arnhem and Darwin regions over the next 3 years. Cases are largely restricted to heterosexual Aboriginal people living in the Northern Territory. The resurgence of congenital syphilis occurred with two cases of congenital syphilis.

Methods:

Cross sectional analysis of outbreak cases and testing data were carried out to describe the epidemiology of the outbreak.

Results:

A total of 800 cases of infectious syphilis are included in this report with 433 (54%) females and 367 (46%) males. The age group with the highest number of cases is 15-19 years with 142 (32.8%) females and 103 (28.1%) males. A total of 560 (70%) cases were below the age of 30 years. Shifting of the age distribution towards older age groups above the age of 45 is noted in the year 2018. About 10% of females were diagnosed and treated for infectious syphilis while they were pregnant. A symptomatic neonate with congenital syphilis was reported in 2014 with another asymptomatic one in 2017. Both neonates were treated appropriately. No HIV infections were detected among those cases with infectious syphilis.

Testing for syphilis has increased over the years in outbreak regions. Over 3500 rapid point of care testing were carried out in areas with high number of cases since 2014 with a community positivity rates between 3-10%.

Conclusion:

Majority of the affected population is quite young. Testing has increased due to vigilant actions of healthcare staff and no deaths were attributed to congenital syphilis. However there is more to be done to diagnose syphilis early and treat all those who are diagnosed as well as their sexual contacts.

**Disclosure of Interest Statement: See *example below*:
*No conflicts of interest.***