

***“SHE SEEMED VERY CLEAN TO ME ...”*: RISK PERCEPTIONS, MISPERCEPTIONS AND SEXUAL BEHAVIOURS AMONG YOUNG HETEROSEXUAL PEOPLE WITH GONORRHOEA IN PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA.**

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Background: Notification rates of gonorrhoea in Australia for heterosexual young adults rose by 63% between 2012 and 2016. In Western Australian (WA) major cities, there was a 612% increase among non-Aboriginal females and a 358% increase in non-Aboriginal males in the ten-year period 2007-2016. No increase was seen among Aboriginal people living in metropolitan WA. A qualitative public health investigation was initiated to explore the risk perceptions and sexual behaviours of heterosexual non-Aboriginal young adults diagnosed with gonorrhoea to inform a public health response.

Methods: An interview schedule was developed and used to conduct semi-structured telephone interviews with non-Aboriginal heterosexual young adults aged 20-34 years living in Perth, WA, who had tested positive for gonorrhoea in the previous three months. Ten males and eight females were interviewed by a female individual with qualitative inquiry skills for up to 45 minutes each. Participants were asked for consent to record the interviews and written transcripts were analysed thematically for common themes.

Results: Having several casual sexual partners following a long-term relationship breakup was commonly reported and condom use or sexual history was not discussed with sexual partners prior to sexual activity. Sexual intercourse sometimes took place in public places and/or unplanned situations where participants could not access condoms despite having condoms at home; condom cost was not mentioned as a barrier. Sexually transmissible infections (STI) were common in participants' networks and considered easy to treat. Condom use was considered unnecessary by some females using hormonal (non-barrier) contraception. Partners with good personal and household hygiene were often perceived as STI-free.

Conclusion: The findings support public health interventions that focus on communication between sexual partners and shifting of risk perceptions in sexual health education programs, ensuring accessibility of quality sexual health information, increasing condom accessibility and acceptability.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: The authors have no interests to disclose.