

A THIRD WAVE: INFECTIOUS SYPHILIS IN HETROSEXUAL PEOPLE IN METROPOLITAN PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Background: In Western Australia, infectious syphilis has primarily affected Aboriginal people in remote areas and men who have sex with men in metropolitan Perth (Perth). However, since 2016, infectious syphilis notifications have been increasing in heterosexual people in Perth.

Approach: Statutory notification data from 2009 to 31/03/2019 were analysed to describe the epidemiology of infectious syphilis in heterosexual people in Perth.

Outcomes: Syphilis rates in 2019 in Perth are projected to be 50/100000 in Aboriginal, and 15/100000 in non-Aboriginal people, representing 14- and 5-fold increases respectively, since 2009. This is unlikely to be due to increased testing alone as test positivity rates in metropolitan males and females increased by >2-, and >3-, fold, respectively between 2014 and 2018. Three-quarters (76%) of female cases were under 45 years old (range 16-55 years, median 32 years). Females notified in 2016-2019 were more likely to have a) acquired syphilis in WA, b) been diagnosed as a result of routine screening, and c) been notified by a GP than those notified in 2009-2015. In 2018, a symptomatic neonate born in Perth was confirmed with congenital syphilis; the mother was tested for syphilis only at the first trimester screen as neither she nor her husband were considered at increased risk.

Innovation and Significance: In contrast with the infectious syphilis outbreak in the USA which is mainly affecting people who inject drugs, heterosexual people contracting syphilis in Perth do not appear to have any particular risk factors. This makes it difficult for clinicians, especially antenatal care providers, to identify patients who should be offered opportunistic syphilis testing and pregnant women who should be offered syphilis testing in the second and third trimesters. Qualitative interviews may be useful to collect risk behaviour information which patients may be reluctant to divulge to their GP, e.g. heterosexual-identifying males who have sex with men.

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