

INTRODUCTION

Policy Forum: *Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs): Persistent Epidemic, Unspoken Topic, Missed Opportunities*

One of the characteristic aspects of public health, but one rarely the focus in the lay media coverage of the field, is the persistence of some of the problems to which public health has devoted significant attention over its long history. Sexually transmitted disease is one of these categories of public health issues, as Dr. Steven Cline, Deputy Director of Public Health of the NC Department of Health and Human Services, has pointed out in his Issue Brief, which never seems to “go away.” Despite the existence of numerous programs to screen for these conditions, to trace the sexual contacts of those diagnosed, or to educate our population, especially those at highest risk, of the dangers of these diseases and how they may be prevented, the incidence and prevalence of these diseases remain a matter of constant concern across our state and the nation as a whole.

One would have thought that the discovery of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and the risk associated with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) would have cast such a wide alarm that public awareness of the dangers of unprotected sexual encounters would have had the effect of significantly reducing both the incidence and the prevalence of these conditions. As the papers in this issue of the *North Carolina Medical Journal* indicate, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) remain one of the most difficult and demanding of the public health challenges in our state. Yet, the good news is that when we devote appropriate financial support and public commitment to the effort, change is possible.

Despite the enormity of the epidemic of STDs, the worldwide (though periodic) media attention to the spread of HIV/AIDS, and the impact of the several varieties of sexually transmitted diseases among many different segments of our population, only scant or passing attention seems to be given to these issues in discussions of community public health, in legislative deliberations of funding for essential public health programs, or in the curricula of our public schools where human reproductive and sexual health issues could be addressed.

In this issue of the Journal, we have invited persons who have led the effort of our state and local public health and education agencies in confronting the problems of STDs to describe the problems faced in this area, as well as some of the programs and initiatives they have sponsored to address these problems. It is not always either easy or straightforward to determine the incidence or prevalence of each of the types of STDs reportable in our state, as Lynne Sampson describes in her Running the Numbers section. But, as Drs. Arlene Sena and Marcia Hobbs point out, screening technologies for most STDs have greatly improved in recent years. Dr. Peter Leone describes current science and best practice for the detection and clinical management of acute HIV infection and makes the case for early intervention by healthcare professionals to prevent the spread of this disease. We are fortunate that Dr. P. Frederick Sparling, one of the nation's leading specialists in infectious disease research, has contributed a brief overview of the prospects for vaccines to protect and prevent these diseases in the future.

Given the fact that nearly half of all newly diagnosed STDs (including HIV) in our state occur among adolescents between the ages of 15 and 24, there is an urgent need for additional attention to these issues through our public schools. North Carolina is one of the states where concerted action with regard to STDs appears to be most urgently needed. It is alarming to read, as one can in Dr. Cline's Issue Brief, that of the 28 US counties reporting over 50 percent of the nation's primary and secondary syphilis cases in 1998, five of these counties were in North Carolina! Special attention to the efforts in two of these counties (Guilford and Robeson) among sex workers are described in this issue, but one can see from reading these accounts just how complicated and frustrating these efforts can be.

We hope by bringing more attention to these issues through these pages that we can see in the year ahead a renewed commitment to address the difficult challenge of STDs in our state and our communities where these problems are most evident.

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