

Sexual lifestyle of women attending inner-city general practices for cervical smears

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SUMMARY

Despite high prevalences of sexually transmitted infections, little is known about the sexual lifestyles of women attending inner-city general practices. Responses from a 1996 questionnaire showed that age at first intercourse and numbers of sexual partners were similar to the national survey five years earlier. However, only 49% of women reporting ≥ 2 sexual partners in the past year said their partner had used a condom at the last sexual intercourse.

Keywords: sexually transmitted infections; inner-city; sexual health.

Introduction

THE 1990–1991 national survey of sexual attitudes and lifestyles provided baseline data on demographic correlates of sexual behaviour.¹ Five years later we investigated age at first sexual intercourse, numbers of sexual partners, and condom use in women attending inner-city general practices for cervical smears.

Method

The 1056 women who had attended for a cervical smear and returned questionnaires in a general practice-based study of chlamydia infection in 1994–1995² were surveyed through the use of a confidential postal questionnaire in May 1996. The questionnaire asked about sexual behaviours known to affect the risk of acquiring sexually transmitted infections: numbers of sexual partners and condom use. To obtain comparable data, questions were, where possible, similar to the national survey.¹ A second mailing was sent to non-responders.

Results

The response rate was 51% (507/998). Fifty-eight women had changed address. The mean age of responders was 29 years (range = 17–36 years). Data from the previous survey showed non-responders were more likely than responders to be aged <25 years (RR = 1.5, 95% CI = 1.2 to 2.0). Eighty-two per cent of responders were white, 9% black, 3% Indian subcontinent, and 6% from other ethnic groups. This is similar to the local ethnic profile. Seven per cent of responders had no educational qualifications, 27% had GCSEs, 10% had A levels, and 56% had other qualifications.

Age at first sexual intercourse

Median age at first sexual intercourse was 18 years (range =

12–30 years). In women aged <25 years, median age of first intercourse was 17, and 17% (13/77) had their first sexual intercourse aged <16 years. Twenty-six per cent (9/34) of those with no educational qualifications and 12% (57/462) of those with some qualifications had their first sexual intercourse before age 16 (RR = 2.2, 95% CI = 1.2 to 4.0). There were no associations between age at first intercourse and numbers of sexual partners or history of chlamydia infection.

Numbers of sexual partners

Seventeen per cent of women (83/502) reported sexual intercourse with ≥ 2 partners in the previous year. This was associated with age <25 years and a history of chlamydia infection (Table 1). There were no significant associations between numbers of partners and complications of chlamydia infection: pelvic inflammatory disease, infertility, and ectopic pregnancy.

Condom use

Twenty-nine per cent (135/472) of women reported their partner had used a condom at the last sexual intercourse, 52% of them to prevent sexually transmitted infections and 86% to prevent pregnancy. Of women with ≥ 2 partners, 49% (40/82) used a condom on the last occasion of sex. Condom use to prevent sexually transmitted infections was associated with age <25 years, black ethnicity, history of chlamydia infection, and ≥ 2 partners in the previous year (Table 2). After adjusting for these factors, only having ≥ 2 partners remained significant.

Discussion

Apart from reliability of self-reported data, the main limitation to the study was the 51% response rate. However, the national survey only achieved a 53% response rate in Greater London.¹ Although not directly comparable, our responders were similar to those in the national survey in terms of median age at first sexual intercourse and percentage reporting first sexual intercourse before age 16 years or ≥ 2 sexual partners in the previous year.

Observational studies of women from Denmark,³ the United States of America,⁴ and the United Kingdom⁵ have found increasing condom use over time. In our study, 33% (25/75) of women aged <25 years had used a condom at the last sexual intercourse compared with 24% in the national survey, although numbers were too small to reach statistical significance. Sexual health promotion by general practitioners and practice nurses may have an important role.⁶ We found 30% of women with ≥ 2 partners who had attended in the past year for a 'woman's problem' reported being offered condoms.

Conclusions

This is the first general practice based study of sexual lifestyles of young women. Age at first intercourse and numbers of sexual partners were similar to the national survey, but condom use was still inadequate in women reporting ≥ 2 partners. These data may help to explain the epidemic of sexually transmitted infections in inner-city populations.

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Table 1. Characteristics of women reporting 2 sexual partners in the previous year.

Characteristic	No (%) with characteristic	Prevalence % of women reporting ≥ 2 partners among women with characteristic	Prevalence % of women reporting ≥ 2 partners among women without characteristic	Odds ratio (95% confidence interval)	Adjusted odds ratio ^a (95% CI) (n = 492)
Age <25 years (n = 502)	78 (15)	27 (21/78)	15 (62/424)	2.2 ^c (1.2 to 3.8)	2.0 ^d (1.1 to 3.6)
First sexual intercourse at age <16 years (n = 496)	66 (13)	18 (12/66)	17 (71/430)	1.1 (0.6 to 2.2)	–
Education \geq GCSE (n = 497)	463 (93)	17 (77/463)	12 (4/34)	1.5 (0.5 to 4.4)	–
Black ethnicity ^b (n = 491)	45 (9)	27 (12/45)	16 (70/446)	2.0 (1.0 to 4.0)	–
Chlamydia in past two years (n = 492)	29 (6)	41 (12/29)	15 (70/463)	4.0 ^c (1.8 to 8.7)	3.7 ^c (1.7 to 8.3)
Pelvic inflammatory disease in past two years (n = 490)	14 (3)	36 (5/14)	16 (76/476)	3.0 (1.0 to 9.3)	–

^aAdjusted for factors which were significant by univariate analysis; ^bAfro-Caribbean or black African origin; ^cP<0.05; ^dP<0.01.

Table 2. Characteristics of women whose partner used a condom at the last sexual intercourse to prevent sexually transmitted infections.

Characteristic	No. (%) with characteristic	Prevalence % of condom use among women with characteristic	Prevalence % of condom use among women without characteristic	Odds ratio (95% CI)	Adjusted odds ratio ^a (95% CI) (n = 481)
Age <25 years (n = 507)	79 (16)	20 (16/79)	11 (45/428)	2.2 ^c (1.2 to 4.1)	1.4 (0.6 to 3.0)
≥ 2 partners in past year (n = 502)	83 (17)	40 (34/83)	7 (27/392)	9.4 ^d (5.2 to 16.9)	9.5 ^d (5.1 to 17.7)
Education \geq GCSE (n = 502)	468 (93)	12 (56/468)	9 (3/34)	1.4 (0.4 to 4.7)	–
Black ethnicity ^b (n = 496)	46 (9)	24 (11/46)	11 (48/450)	2.6 ^d (1.3 to 5.5)	1.8 (0.9 to 5.0)
Chlamydia in past two years (n = 497)	29 (6)	31 (9/29)	11 (50/468)	3.8 ^d (1.6 to 8.7)	1.8 (0.7 to 5.0)

^aAdjusted for factors which were significant by univariate analysis; ^bAfro-Caribbean or black African origin; ^cP<0.05; ^dP<0.01.

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