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Breaking the chain of transmission: Nurses' role in preventing STI's

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Abstract
Sexually transmitted infections (STI's) affect people of all ages, socioeconomic levels and cultures and are now a serious public health issue and have reached epidemic proportions in many nations. More than 30 different bacteria, viruses and parasites are known to be transmitted through sexual contact with 8 pathogens being linked to the greatest incidence of disease. Although often preventable, STIs are on the increase worldwide with the World Health Organization (WHO 2016) estimating that more than 500 million new infections of curable STI's like gonorrhoea, trichomoniasis, syphilis and chlamydia occur globally each year.

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STIs have a profound impact on sexual and reproductive health but can largely be prevented with behaviour change and this is where nurses play a vital role. Some behaviours are more likely to result in a person acquiring an STI than others and risky behaviour includes having sex with multiple and new partners, misusing drugs, engaging in unprotected sex, having sex while intoxicated and having sex in exchange for money. Behaviour change though, remains a complex challenge but nurses are well positioned to enable behaviour change given their theoretical understanding and their knowledge translation skills.

Sexually transmitted infections include those caused by bacteria, viruses, fungi, protozoa and parasites. Portals of entry for these agents of transmission include the mouth, genitalia, urinary meatus, anus, rectum and skin. STIs have many consequences and nurses who understand disease processes have the responsibility to provide health education to all people regardless of their gender, age or sexual orientation on how to prevent STIs. Nurses have a critical role in the prevention of STIs by providing accurate information about these diseases,
their prevention, treatment and potential complications. Nurses should be aware of policies, protocols and strategies and be aware that Australia has guidelines within the Third National Sexually Transmissible Infections Strategy 2014–2017 and that The World Health Organization (WHO) (2007) has a publication called Global strategy for the prevention and control of sexually transmitted infections: 2006–2015. Some sobering statistics to compel nurses to be part of the solution.

- A person may have an STI but have no symptoms.
- Two or more STIs frequently coexist in the same person.
- More than 1 million people acquire an STI every day.
- More than 530 million people have the virus that causes genital herpes (HSV2).
- More than 290 million women have a human papillomavirus (HPV) infection. HPV causes 530 000 cases of cervical cancer and 275 000 cervical cancer deaths each year.
- Some STIs can increase the risk of HIV acquisition three-fold or more.
- STIs can have serious consequences beyond the immediate impact of the infection itself, through mother-to-child transmission of infections and chronic diseases.
- Drug resistance, especially for gonorrhoea, is a major threat to reducing the impact of STIs worldwide.
- In developing countries, STIs and their complications rank in the top five disease categories for which adults seek healthcare.
- In women of childbearing age, STIs, excluding HIV, are second only to maternal factors as causes of disease, death and healthy life lost. According to estimates from the WHO (2015), around 36.9 million people were living with HIV in 2014. The number of people newly infected with HIV in 2014 was 2 million.
- AIDS deaths globally in 2013 accounted for 1.5 million people.
- AIDS incidence in Australia (0.9 per 100 000 population) is similar to that in the UK and Canada (1.4 and 0.8, respectively) but much lower than in the US (12.8).
- New South Wales had the highest incidence of AIDS diagnosis followed by Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania and the Northern Territory.
- Chlamydia was the most common STI notification in Australia.
- Indigenous Australians are over-represented in STI notification data.
- One in two sexually active people will contract an STI by age 25.

It’s time to break the chain and nurses must be part of the solution.
