Background:
In rural areas of developing countries, gynecological and sexual care are often overlooked. This is problematic because the consequences of STIs are potentially devastating:
- Tubal pregnancy, miscarriage, increased risk of newborn death, infertility, cervical cancers, chronic physical pain, emotional distress, and social rejection of women.

Sexual Health Statistics in Himachal Pradesh:
- Sexually active population: 3.5/6.8 million
- STIs rank second among women of reproductive age (15-49 years old) for healthy life lost
- Other relevant statistics are displayed in Figures 1 and 2.

Methods:
- Himalayan Health Exchange (HHE) team of medical students and physicians examined approximately 1,000 patients in clinics throughout Himachal Pradesh.
- Trip Duration: June 20th–July 11th, 2013
- Patient Population: Rural villagers
- Clinic Locations: Chattru, Rangrik, Sumdo, Dunkhar, Mane, Tabo, Kungr, Lalong
- Data Collection: Qualitative data was collected consisting of:
  - Personal log entries detailing observations and evaluation of clinic patients
  - Interviews with HHE medical students and physicians about their patient interactions

Results:
- Interviews with HHE colleagues revealed:
  - Gynecologic health issues were among the major complaints of women of reproductive age who visited the clinic.
  - Many students expressed shock over the high prevalence of STIs among women.
  - Very few patients reported using condoms during sexual intercourse.
- Of twenty-five patients personally examined, six were women of reproductive age.
  - Three of these women suffered from STI symptoms and were treated with the appropriate antibiotics.
  - Each of the patients reported having symptoms for over one year.
  - Two women reported not seeking medical attention sooner because “It’s too far.”
  - One patient was very reluctant to talk about her sexual habits and symptoms.
  - Subsequently, her diagnosis had to be made based almost solely on exam findings.

Discussion and Conclusions:
- Current research, along with observation in medical clinics in rural villages, reveals several barriers to women’s sexual health in Himachal Pradesh.
- Main barriers include:
  - Stigma regarding sexual health that prevents women from seeking treatment.
  - “Culture of Silence” surrounding STIs.
  - Lack of proper sexual health education.
  - Lack of condom use.
  - Access to care is very poor.
  - Closest clinic that HHE physicians could refer patients to was generally between eleven and seventeen hours away by bus.
- Many steps must be taken to improve women’s sexual health in Himachal Pradesh.
  - Most promising strategy currently in place to lower rates of STIs in Himachal Pradesh: National AIDS Control Program.

References:

Purpose: To assess sexual health, and its barriers, among women of reproductive age in rural villages of Himachal Pradesh, India.