



BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S SEXUAL HEALTH CARE IN HIMACHAL PRADESH, INDIA



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

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 million³
 - STIs rank second among women of reproductive age (15-49 years old) for healthy life lost³
 - Other relevant statistics are displayed in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1. RTI/STI Indicators of women of reproductive age in Himachal Pradesh¹

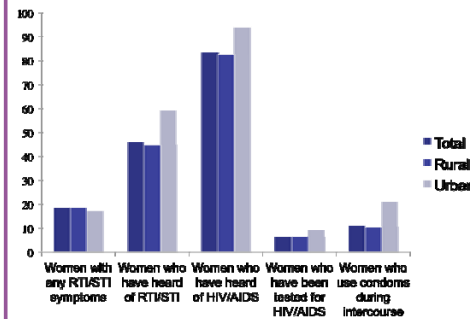
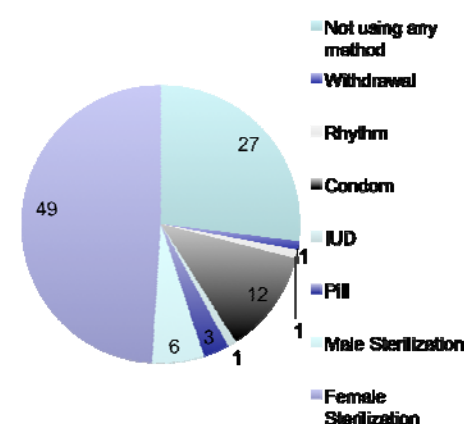


Figure 2. Method of contraception among women of reproductive age in Himachal Pradesh²



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 Program³

References:

- International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), 2010. *District Level Household and Facility Survey (DLHS-3), 2007-08: India. Himachal Pradesh*. Mumbai: IIPS.
- International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and Macro International. 2008. *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3), India, 2005-06: Himachal Pradesh*. Mumbai: IIPS.
- Sharma, N. L., Ganju, S. A. (2012). Initial assessment of scaled-up sexually transmitted infection intervention in Himachal Pradesh under National AIDS Control Program – III. *Indian J Sex Transm Dis*, 1, 20–24.



Himalayan Health Exchange

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, Kungri, Lalung
- 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