Using local evidence to inform public health priorities for lesbian & bisexual women’s sexual health

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INTRODUCTION

The 2010 National Women’s Health Policy (NWHP) acknowledged for the first time that lesbian and bisexual women may be at risk of poor health outcomes. It called for “information and access to services to sexual health, reproductive health, safe sex practices, screening and maternal health”. A lack of systematic, nuanced research on the sexual health of Australian lesbian and bisexual women has resulted in lack of data and difficulty in understanding the needs of and how best to respond to this group.

AIM

To identify the sexual health needs of lesbian and bisexual women.

METHODS

A cross-sectional survey of women’s health and wellbeing was delivered at lesbian and gay community events in Sydney and Perth in 2012.

RESULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid surveys</th>
<th>Sydney 835</th>
<th>Perth 726</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age range</td>
<td>Sydney 16–76yr</td>
<td>Perth 16–70yr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median age</td>
<td>Sydney 32yr</td>
<td>Perth 28yr</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Sexual identity & attraction

- Lesbian
  - Sydney 68%
  - Perth 64%
- Bisexual
  - Sydney 13%
  - Perth 21%
- Queer or other identifying
  - Sydney 13%
  - Perth 14%
- Exclusive attraction to women
  - Sydney 29%
  - Perth 32%

Relationship status

- Regular relationship with woman
  - Sydney 49%
  - Perth 48%
- In relationship < 6mo
  - Sydney 13%
  - Perth 21%
- Casual sexual partner past 6mo
  - Sydney 30%
  - Perth 31%
- Regular relationship + casual partner
  - Sydney 21%
  - Perth 28%

Sexual behaviour with women

- Sex with woman ever
  - Sydney 95%
  - Perth 91%
- Sex with woman past 6mo
  - Sydney 77%
  - Perth 71%
- Recent sex + multiple sexual partners
  - Sydney 30%
  - Perth 19%

STI screening

- STI test ever
  - Sydney 54%
  - Perth 46%
- STI test < 6mo
  - Sydney 18%
  - Perth 13%
- STI diagnosis ever
  - Sydney 12%
  - Perth 20%

Sexual behaviour with men

- Sex with man ever
  - Sydney 63%
  - Perth 56%
- Sex with man past 6mo
  - Sydney 15%
  - Perth 20%
- Among women reporting sex with hetero man past 6mo, often unprotected
  - Sydney 26%
  - Perth 35%
- Among women reporting sex with gay/bi man past 6mo, often unprotected
  - Sydney 11%
  - Perth 24%

Cervical cancer screening

- 3yr participation rate
  - Sydney 72%
  - Perth 64%
- Never screened + sex with man never
  - Sydney 25%
  - Perth 32%
- Never screened + sex with man ever
  - Sydney 12%
  - Perth 17%

THESE FINDINGS RAISE QUESTIONS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

- How can STI prevention programs encompass the knowledge that a majority of lesbian and bisexual women have had sex with a man? And that unprotected sex is common?
- Does this population respond to health promotion designed for assumed heterosexual audiences?
- How can we inform women who have never had sex with a man of the importance of a regular Pap smear? And that sex with a man is not a criterion?
- How can healthcare providers create culturally sensitive environments to encourage open dialogue around sexual practice?