

# STIS RESEARCH FLYER



Melbourne  
Sexual  
Health  
Centre

## STIs

### Legal vs Illegal Sexworkers Victoria, Australia



***Did you know that the rates of STIs are lower in the legal sex industry (ie licensed prostitution providers) than the illegal sex industry (ie street workers)?***

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**Gabby Skelsey**, Health Educator, Resourcing Health and Education

**Kim Messieh**, Sexual Health Nurse, Melbourne Sexual Health Centre

**Christopher Fairley**, University of Melbourne, Melbourne Sexual Health Centre

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#### **Background**

Resourcing Health and Education (RhED) is a program of the Inner South Community Health Service (ISCHS). The program is staffed by peer educators and other professionals. RhED delivers statewide health education, information, referral, counselling/support and advocacy to the sex industry in Victoria. Services are provided via outreach, telephone and a drop in centre.

Melbourne Sexual Health Centre (MSHC) provides free and confidential sexual health screens via a walk-in system. Many clients of MSHC are sex workers, some of whom require certificates to work legally in the sex industry in Victoria. Outreach programs are also run in the community with a focus towards marginalised community groups in Victoria.

MSHC and RhED provide an STI clinic to street sex workers via a drop in service at the RhED premises as well as undertaking outreach on the ISCHS bus in St Kilda. Screening and follow up remain an important part of service delivery to this group.

This project was undertaken by MSHC in conjunction with RhED.

#### **Objective**

To compare the proportion of clients with a bacterial STI who are street sex workers with sex workers attending MSHC for a certificate who mostly work in legal brothels.

#### **Method**

We compared 3 groups of women

- Street sex workers attending the outreach clinic
- Sex workers attending MSHC for certificates
- Non sex workers attending MSHC.

At MSHC, epidemiological data is collected on clients at the first visit and on re-attendance for those who have not had data collected in the last 3 months.

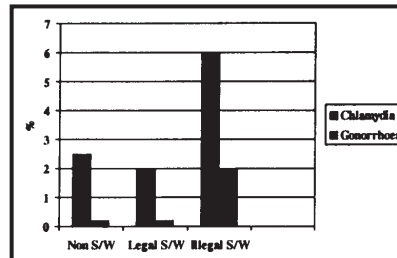
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## Results

Between 1 July and 31 December 2002, MSHC had 12,075 client consultations, of whom 5008 (41%) were female. Of these 3065 were new or had not attended the centre for more than 3 months (data on sex work available). Of these 752 (25%) reported attending the centre to obtain a certificate for sex work (SW) while 2,313 (75%) did not attend for this reason (NSW).

Gonorrhoea (NG), Chlamydia (CT) or Trichomonas (TV) was diagnosed in 21 (2.8%) of 752 SW, and 68 (2.9%) of 2,313 non sex workers ( $P=0.84$ ). Individual infections NG (2 vs 4), CT (15 vs 56), and TV (4 vs 8) occurred in SW vs NSW respectively ( $P>0.47$ ). The mean number of male sexual partners in the last 3 months excluding partners through work was higher in sex workers (1.75) vs non sex workers (1.2) ( $P=0.01$ ).



CT was diagnosed in 13 of 221 street sex workers and NG in 5. This was significantly higher than in sex workers screened at MSHC ( $p=0.02$  for CT, and  $p=0.002$  for NG).

## Discussion

The low rate of STI's in the legal sex industry is highlighted by:

- ❖ Health education and information provided by RhED
- ❖ Sex workers' knowledge of sexual health and peer support between workers
- ❖ Recognition of sex work as a legal profession, therefore sexual health is important
- ❖ Legislation around safe sex practices and STI/BBV testing requirements (monthly STI swabs/three monthly BBV checks) (Donovan & Harcourt, 1996; Hancock, 1991; Campbell, 1991; Pyett, Haste & Snow, 1996)

Possible rationale towards a higher rate of STI's in the illegal sex industry may be due to:

- ❖ Drug related physical and mental health issues
- ❖ Violence/assaults
- ❖ Risk taking behaviour linked to changes in drug markets
- ❖ Transience/homelessness

At times street sex workers do not consider sexual health as a main priority because of these issues. (Pyett, Warr & Pope, 1999).

## Conclusion

From MSHC data, prevalence of STI's was significantly higher in street sex workers than legal sex workers attending MSHC.

Based upon this data, further research in the following areas could be undertaken:

- ❖ whether there is a change of behaviour after a positive STI/BBV result
- ❖ on the prevalence of STI's in the general community compared with those working in the legal sex industry
- ❖ investigating factors associated with STI acquisition among those who report legal sexwork i.e. private life vs workplace.

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Pyett, P., Warr, D. & Pope, J. 1999. It goes with the territory: street sex work is risky business. *Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society*, LaTrobe. p. 1.



Kim Messleh  
Melbourne Sexual Health Centre  
580 Swanston St  
CARLTON VIC 3053 AUSTRALIA  
Ph 03 9347 0244  
Fax 03 9347 2230  
Email: kmessleh@mshc.org.au

Australasian Sexual Health Conference

Gabby Skelsey  
RhED  
10 Inkerman St  
ST KILDA VIC 3182 AUSTRALIA  
Ph 03 9534 8166  
Fax 03 9525 4492  
Email: gskelsey@lschs.org.au



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