

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

October 28 2018

“STD Rates Are Soaring In USA”

After decades of declining STDs, in recent years we've been sliding backwards in the USA. "The United States continues to have the highest STD rates in the industrialized world," said David Harvey, executive director of the National Coalition of STD Directors (NCSDD). Harvey said STDs lead to \$16 billion in preventable healthcare costs each year. Preliminary data indicate that rates of three sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) — *Chlamydia* infection, gonorrhea, and syphilis — hit an all-time high in 2017, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The CDC said that the United States is on track to have 1.7 million cases of *Chlamydia* infection (up from 1.59 million in 2016), 555,608 cases of gonorrhea, and 30,644 cases of primary and secondary syphilis in 2017. Overall, that's 200,000 more cases of the three reportable STDs than in 2016, and it's the fourth year in a row that the United States has had a significant increase in those conditions. The early data indicate that from 2013 to 2017, the number of gonorrhea cases increased by 67% and syphilis cases nearly doubled. A significant number of the syphilis cases — 17,736 — were in men who have sex with men. The figures are alarming. We are in the midst of an absolute STD public health crisis. Experts cited several reasons for the steady increase in sexually transmitted infections, among them: a lack of education about and awareness of sexual health and STDs; a lack of screening by physicians; patients not asking for screening or treatment; and decades of underfunding of public health efforts to prevent, diagnose, and treat the conditions. The American public and members of Congress need to know that the explosion in STDs comes on the heels of years of cutbacks in federal funding. The public health infrastructure has been eroding for years. Regarding STDs, public health disease investigators talk with people who may have the infections to try to convince them to change behaviors; they may also track down recent contacts in the hopes of preventing spread. An additional \$70 million is needed for state and local STD programs, which would bring total funding to \$227 million in fiscal 2019. Clinicians should be taking sexual histories or offering screening to patients. Physicians and patients are sometimes reticent to start the conversation concerning STDs. The CDC estimates that there are 20 million new notifiable and non-notifiable STD cases every year in the United States, and half of these occur in people 15 to 24 years old.

In the America that I love, most common STDs can essentially be cured with antibiotics, but if not treated, the resulting health effects can include infertility, ectopic pregnancy, stillbirth, and higher risk for HIV transmission.

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