

Young women's stories of having a sexually transmitted infection



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background



- ▣ Major public health issue
- ▣ High morbidity and mortality (WHO, 2007)
- ▣ Over 30 pathogens responsible for STIs (WHO, 2012)
- ▣ Genital herpes, human papilloma virus (HPV), chlamydia, gonorrhoea, syphilis, trichomoniasis, HIV, hepatitis
- ▣ Cause significant physical and psychological harm (WHO, 2001)

Statistics



- Herpes: 1/8 (Cunningham et al. 2006)
- HPV: 4/5 people (Cancer Council NSW, 2013)
- 33.2 million people around the world are living with HIV (6,000 young people are infected with HIV daily) (UNAIDS, 2003; UNAIDS & WHO, 2007)
- Over 498.9 million new cases per annum of chlamydia, gonorrhoea, syphilis and trichomoniasis (15 - 49 years) (WHO, 2012)

Women and STIs



- Have severe consequences for women
- Women are vulnerable to STI acquisition due to
 - ! social norms, gender roles (Hird & Jackson, 2001; Reddy & Dunne, 2007)
 - ! condom negotiation (De Visser & Smith, 2001; Ehrhardt et al., 2002)

Young people and STIs



Young people are at an increased risk of STI due to:

- Invulnerability
- Risk behaviour
- Social changes
- Inexperience (Dehne & Riedner, 2005; WHO, 2004)

Aim



- To explore young women's stories of having a sexually transmitted infection from a feminist perspective

Methodology



- Feminist methodology
- Qualitative online interviews- email and Instant messenger
- Inclusion criteria: any women that experienced an STI between the ages of 18-30 years
- HIV was excluded from this study

Participants



- Ten women participants
- Aged 21-39 years
- Various backgrounds
- Cervical HPV, genital warts, herpes, chlamydia, pubic lice
- Casual partners, husbands, boyfriends, long-term partners, rape
- Pseudonyms are used

Findings



- Invulnerability
- Disrupted sense of self
- Stigma and stereotypes
- Blame and shame
- Unworthy of love
- Denial
- Sources of support

Invulnerability



- *I didn't think I was at risk. I felt immortal; I thought it didn't happen to people like me, until I was diagnosed with warts [Rita].*

Disrupted sense of self



- *I was ashamed because I was now infected with this virus and would always be.... I felt tainted [Lilly]*

Stigma and stereotypes



- ... [I felt] *Dirty*, because my views on contracting an STD like this have been the same as the rest of society... Only someone who sleeps around regularly gets STDs ... It's like going from being a cool kid in the playground, to being an outcast, I'm on the other side of the fence, and it's not nice [Bree].

Blame and shame



- *I felt ashamed. Looking back I know I did not do wrong but I felt dirty and used and I felt like I was just disgusting. ... I was filled with shame and it turned into self-hatred in a way. I still can't believe I was treated so badly [Ruby].*

Unworthy of love



- *I didn't feel that I deserved anything to do with relationships. I didn't think I deserved to be loved or wanted by anyone [Cathy].*

Denial



- *With the herpes it was diagnosed with a blood test but I don't ever remember having it so I suppose I have been in a bit of denial about that. ... I never told these men I slept with about it or any of them. With herpes I have read that it is painful so I think I would know if I had it [Ruby].*

Sources of support



- *I went online and read other's people's experiences, and had really supportive feedback from others who were experiencing the same thing [Lilly].*

Conclusions & Implications



- None of the women accessed STI services
- Only 2 women were provided with emotional support
- Further education and knowledge is needed among healthcare professionals that do not specialise in sexual health

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