



Our sexual health

Dr Paul Martiquet, Medical Health Officer

Our sexual health is an issue that affects each of us, but before we can see and understand the big picture, we need to start by looking the indicators, trends and research to see where we have been and where we now stand.

The first ever national statistical report of Canadians' sexual and reproductive health, called Sexual Health in Canada (SHC), was recently released. It offers a comprehensive look at the major trends that influence and affect our sexuality and health. Some of those trends are disturbing; others encouraging.

The report shows how the rise in reported sexually transmitted infection rates runs counter to Health Canada's 1996 National Goals for the Prevention and Control of Sexually Transmitted Diseases.

Health Canada had set a goal of lowering the rate of chlamydia to less than 80 cases per 100,000 by 2000. But in that year, the rate was almost double at 150 cases.

While it is disturbing to see rates of diseases like chlamydia and syphilis continue to grow, the SHC report also shows that Health Canada's goals for 2010 are unrealistic.

For British Columbians, SHC shows that we had the highest rate of new HIV cases in Canada in 2003, and only a quarter of those were attributed to heterosexual transmission. It also says that significantly fewer women than men were reported as newly infected. Yet the difference in infection rates between men and women has steadily declined since 1987. Aboriginal women are disproportionately affected. Aboriginal women form less than five percent of

BC's population, but represent 30 per cent of all new reported female HIV infections. In 2004, the reported AIDS rate in BC was more than two and a half times the national average.

The reported rates of many sexually transmitted diseases are clearly higher in BC against national rates. Chlamydia and syphilis rates are higher. Gonorrhoea has also been increasing since 1997, though not as prevalent as has chlamydia. For BC men, their infection rate for gonorrhoea was higher than for men nationally. (The rate for women? Significantly lower.) In 2004, the reported syphilis rate in BC was more than twice the national average.

In keeping with the national trend, the pregnancy rate in BC has been declining over the past decade. Along with that is good news: the rate of live births

among BC adolescents was lower than the national average at nine versus 12 per 1000 in 2003. In that year, the proportion of pregnant teens that chose to terminate their pregnancy was significantly higher in BC than nationally.

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Sexual Health in Canada contains valuable information. It notes both positive and negative trends in Canadians' sexual and reproductive health and underscores critical gaps in research, public awareness and access to services. It is a good first step.