



Barriers to Pap Testing Among Sex Workers across Metro Vancouver

Background

Globally, cervical cancer is among the most common cancers affecting women of child-bearing age and continues to claim a substantial number of lives every year. However, the Papanicolaou (Pap) test, which detects cancerous and precancerous tissues, has drastically reduced cervical cancer-related deaths. While research has increasingly shown that sex workers face higher risks for cervical cancer, little is known about Pap testing rates in sex workers, or challenges they face in getting tested.

The Question

How many sex workers receive an annual Pap test and what are the factors that prevent or facilitate Pap testing?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from interviews with **611 street- and off-street sex workers between January 2010 and August 2013**. This project is part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access), an ongoing study on working conditions, health and safety in the sex industry led by GSHI/BCCfE and UBC, in collaboration with a range of community partners, with ongoing outreach to street and indoor sex work venues (by experiential and non-experiential team).

The Results

Of the 611 sex workers in the study, only **38.6%** reported having a Pap test in the last year.

- Those who reported any barriers to health care services were less likely to receive a pap test. **The most common barriers to Pap testing were: poor treatment by health care staff, limited hours of operation and language barriers.**
- Though HIV positive sex workers were more likely to have a Pap test, almost half did not receive their Pap test within the recommended guidelines.
- **Sex workers who had accessed a mobile/outreach service providing Pap testing were 35% more likely to have had an annual Pap test.**

Community and sex worker-led mobile outreach service delivery models offering Pap tests alongside other sexual and reproductive health services are needed to increase screening among sex workers.

The Policy Implications

- Given the low rates of Pap testing among sex workers in our sample, there is a critical need to **address the social and structural barriers** that prevent voluntary Pap testing, such as **poor interactions with health care staff, language barriers and limited hours of operation.**
- **Innovative mobile and outreach delivery models, including community and sex worker-led efforts,** that provide comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, tailored to the specific needs of sex workers may help increase Pap testing.

Duff P, Ogilvie G, Shoveller J, Amram O, Chettiar J, Nguyen P, Montaner J, Shannon K. Barriers to Cervical Screening Among Sex Workers In Vancouver: The Importance of Social and Structural Factors in Shaping Access to Reproductive Health Services. *American Journal of Public Health*.