Exploring the acceptability of online STI testing for rural young people in Victoria.

Tomnay JE, Bourke L & Fairley CK.

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Introduction

• Young people in Australia are disproportionately affected by STIs
• Most STIs are diagnosed in general practice in Australia
• There are chronic rural medical workforce shortages
• Rural Australians who have reduced access to General Practitioners (GPs) test less frequently for STIs than their metropolitan counterparts\(^1,2\).

Background

Access is a broad and multidimensional concept, consisting of five key aspects\(^3\)

1. **Availability** of the health service
2. **Accessibility** by the relevant consumer
3. **Acceptability** to the local population
4. **Affordability** of the service
5. **Accommodation** how well services accommodate the needs of local consumers

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Barriers to service access for rural young people4-7

- privacy
- lack of service provider choice
- transport
- cost

These issues have been found to prevent rural young people from seeking STI testing and treatment.

What’s available versus what’s acceptable

Previously a metropolitan health service (MSHC) set up a free STI phone consultation service with postal samples and treatment for rural young people.

Results: Service usage was considerably less than anticipated with only 28 rural young people participating over an 11-month period despite widespread advertising\(^8\).

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So we re-designed the service to include online testing…..

BUT

Before launching the website we designed this study to…..
Study Aims:

1. Explore the perceptions of rural young people in relation to access to health care and
2. Ask rural young people to provide their views about a sexual health service that provided web based, rather than phone STI testing and treatment.
Method
Over a three month period in 2012:
We held 7 focus groups in 2 rural towns.

Town A
• population of 1900 people and approx. 200 kilometres from Melbourne.
• It does not have a secondary school

Town B
• population of 3500 people and approx. 200 kilometres from Melbourne
• It has a secondary school
Recruitment of participants

All participants were recruited from football/netball clubs.

Recruitment involved

1. first contacting the president of the sporting clubs
2. attending a club committee meeting in each town to explain the study
3. young people invited by the committee to participate in the focus groups on consecutive weeks after training
The participants

The participants were grouped by gender and age.

In six of the seven focus groups, 16 and 17 year olds were separated from those aged between 18 and 25 because of confidence and access differences.
Focus Groups

- Interviews lasted between an hour and an hour and a half
- Were led by an experienced qualitative researcher
- Audio recorded and later transcribed
- Written notes were also taken by a second researcher to record observations of the group interactions and dynamics
- Participants were reimbursed $40AUD
Focus Groups continued

• During the focus groups young people were asked to discuss their access to local health services (what services they used, when, why and how)

• Then shown a website and asked to provide feedback about the acceptability of online STI testing
TESTme is a free service of Melbourne Sexual Health Centre (MSHC) for rural Victorians aged 25 years and younger, rural Victorian men who have sex with men and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

TESTme offers online testing for chlamydia – just click on 'Get the TESTme kit' button.

TESTme also offers telephone consultations with a nurse for Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) testing and contraceptive advice. Call 1800 739 836 during office hours or email for an appointment.

GIRLS:
- Females aged 25 years and younger who are living 100 km or more from Melbourne
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Victoria

GUYS:
- Males aged 25 years and younger who are living 100 km or more from Melbourne
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Victoria
- Men who have sex with men who are living 100 km or more from Melbourne
Data Analysis Methods

- All transcribed interviews were read and independently coded by two researchers.
- Both researchers identified common themes and agreed on three main themes in relation to the acceptability of online STI testing to the participants.
Results:

Seven focus groups comprising about fifty participants were conducted in two rural towns. Both towns have GP services but no specialist sexual health services. Three main themes emerged from the focus group transcripts.
Results:

1. **Readiness to seek sexual health services**

   – Young men particularly, appeared reluctant to discuss or address their own sexual health needs
   – Young people seemed to be waiting for STI symptoms or problems to occur rather than screening or preventing them
   – Young women talked about being more proactive than young men
   – Young women would seek out services when appropriate
   – Young men would ‘hope for the best’ and assume ‘all’s good’ until an obvious problem emerged
2. Barriers and Facilitators to using the local GP

- As expected, the younger groups described more significant barriers to accessing GP services in rural communities than the older groups and therefore

- the younger participants were more interested in using an online service for both STI testing and treatment.
2. Barriers and Facilitators to using the local GP

When asked directly if using a website was a better option than attending a local GP, a female participant (<18 years) stated

“It’s awkward [going to the doctor]…you feel more comfortable [using a website]…. You wouldn’t have to lie… especially at a young age if you’re mum had to drive you there.”
2. Barriers and Facilitators to using the local GP

Conversely, in an older male group, a participant stated:

“I don’t know I just think it’s a lot more practical to just go and see the doctor…. I mean it’s more expensive but you know you’re seeing someone… it’s just easier.”
2. Barriers and Facilitators to using the local GP

There were some differences between the two towns:

- young people from one town sought out non-local GPs for sexual health services while young people living in the other town were more comfortable using local services.
2. Barriers and Facilitators to using the local GP

- young people in the first town talked about concerns with trust, confidentiality and anonymity as reasons for seeking out non-local GPs.

- young people in the second town implied that their local doctors provided a confidential service and nurses made an effort to get young people seen quickly and appropriately.
3. Barriers and Facilitators to online testing

**Using the mail during online STI testing**

All groups discussed the process of having a test kit and/or treatment sent to their home and the younger participants (aged 16 and 17 years) were more concerned about their parents finding out.
3. Barriers and Facilitators to online testing

*Using the mail during online STI testing*

**Male participant aged < 18 years**

“going in the mail, everyday it’s going to your parent’s house, you don’t want your parents to know about it, everyday you’re going to be the first one to that mailbox checking to see whether it’s there.”

**Female participant aged < 18 years**

“yeah but then you get antibiotics through the mail…your parents will find out this way”.
3. Barriers and Facilitators to online testing

Using the mail during online STI testing

Here’s a solution from the younger participants:

Young woman <18 years
“if it doesn’t say what the package is..... you’d just be like ‘I bought some clothes off ebay’.”

Young man <18 years
“I’d just send it [the testing kit] to a mates joint”
3. Barriers and Facilitators to online testing

Cost of the service

The majority of participants indicated that providing the online service free of charge would remove one of the barriers to testing.

“I reckon this is good…it’s easy…this doesn’t take time away from work or driving anywhere or paying.”
Discussion:

Factors required for use of online STI testing:
- readiness to seek sexual health services
- the availability and acceptability of existing local services.

Other factors directly related to the website
- whether the website looks credible
- is confidential
- the cost of the service.
Discussion:

• The concerns about sexual health issues are different amongst these young people as their experiences differ depending on their age, their family, their trust in local services and the extent to which local health services are youth friendly.
• Not all young rural people can be homogenised when designing rural health services.
• Issues of access to rural sexual health services stem beyond the availability of services to the acceptability and safety of young people.
Conclusion:

- Free online testing services address issues of access for rural young people.
- While barriers external to rural sexual health services may remain, a free web based STI testing service is acceptable to these rural young people.
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