

Chlamydia screening wonderland

Our public health expert Catherine Heffernan says councils haven't been pulling their weight in the national drive to cut Chlamydia rates by working with health partners to boost screening.

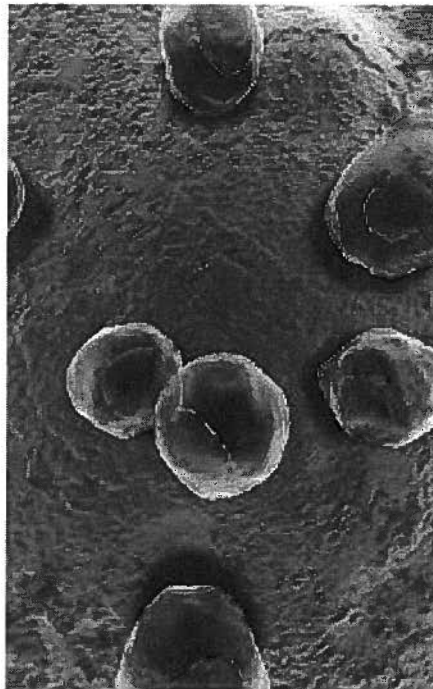
As Tim Burton's 'Alice in Wonderland' hit the UK cinemas, an army of NHS performance managers across the country were busily striving to ensure their Chlamydia screening rates were on target by April. Different geographical areas have to screen certain proportions of their 15-24 populations by April 2010 and these proportions of expected screens will rise again next year.

There may be no Red Queen screaming "Off with their heads!" but there is pressure to achieve the target, especially as this is a joint target between local authorities and primary care trusts.

Chlamydia is the most common curable sexually transmitted infection in the UK. It is largely asymptomatic and if untreated, it can have serious consequences such as infertility. It can be cured easily with antibiotics but treating Chlamydia and its complications can cost the UK economy £100 million annually. Those aged 24 years and younger are disproportionately affected.

Since 2001, the UK government has rolled out the National Chlamydia Screening Programme (NCSP) with the aim to control Chlamydia in those aged 15 to 24 years through early detection and treatment of asymptomatic infection. The key element is that screening is opportunistic. That means that it is not done in the traditional GUM clinic but is offered to people attending GP practices, pharmacies, antenatal clinics, college events, music festivals, sports clubs even hairdressers. The test is simple – a urine sample or vaginal swab – that is then sent to a laboratory for testing. Many young people are ignorant about sexual health and the opportunistic screening model provides a way of capturing those who would not normally attend a GUM clinic.

Across the country, engagement by local authorities in Chlamydia screening activities has largely been limited despite shared objectives being reflected in Local Strategic Partnerships. This



is partly due to Chlamydia being seen as a health issue. Certainly, studies of the NCSP have focused on the health input, highlighting the difficulties in follow-up, partner notification, training of front-line staff (including GP practice receptionists) and whether a call-recall system would be more appropriate.

There is a movement towards making the Chlamydia test into an annual sexual health check-up, which sits comfortably with GP practice ethos. A patient visits and the GP or practice nurse is prompted to ask about their Chlamydia test being due. For the college population, it is now

recommended that when GP practices sign up new patients, they should include the Chlamydia test as part of the full health check-up.

Emphasis on health has meant that in the local authority, activity has tended to rely on one or two sexual health posts. The result has been low rates for youth services and educational settings. This is a shame as local authority services often reach those young people that health services have difficulty accessing. Sites like youth cafes, youth clubs, sports centres, information shops are all wonderful ways to reach young people. Young people are much more likely to do self-help than visit their GP and by targeting young people in non-health environments, you can raise the importance

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of sexual health. This approach is also free of the stigma that young people attach to attending GUM clinic.

Commitment from senior management is needed to endorse the expectation that access to Chlamydia screening is widely promoted and/or available through local authority services for young people. Joint working with the PCT is crucial. For starters, identifying the number of LA sites and trained screeners can help set what percentage the LA is expected to contribute to the overall target and this aids performance management. The Chlamydia target can sometimes seem like the disappearing white rabbit but the contribution that an LA gives is vital and needed. 