

National Strategic Approach for Responding to Rising Rates of Syphilis in Australia 2021

Prepared through the Communicable Diseases Network Australia (CDNA) and BBV and STI Standing Committee (BBVSS)

Endorsed by the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) on 23 March 2021

Overview

Notifications of infectious syphilis among females have increased considerably since 2011, in part due to the ongoing outbreak in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples residing in predominantly regional and remote areas of Queensland, the Northern Territory, Western Australia, and South Australia. Notifications among non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women outside of outbreak declared regions, including major cities, have also contributed to the marked increase in notifications overall. Particularly concerning is the high proportion of infections occurring in women of reproductive age (approximately 90% of all female cases notified each year) which has considerable public health implications given the increased risk of congenital syphilis and adverse pregnancy outcomes. Sustained high rates of infectious syphilis in men, including men who have sex with men, is also contributing to the considerable rise in notifications overall.

While there are clearly three distinct population groups contributing to increased rates of syphilis, it is expected that there is an overlap in sexual networks impacting on the distribution of infection across Australia. To effectively respond to syphilis in Australia, it is imperative that we look at interventions at a population level as well as targeted efforts in identified population groups.

The Strategic Approach builds on and intersects with existing national activities related to syphilis (STIs and BBVs), including the:

- [Five National BBV and STI Strategies](#) and supporting [National BBV and STI Surveillance and Monitoring Plan](#).
- [National Strategic Approach for an enhanced response to the disproportionately high rates of STI and BBV in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people](#).

Three national targets have been developed to provide a specific focus for efforts towards rising rates of syphilis and adverse outcomes in Australia:

1. Reduce incidence of syphilis overall, with a focus on women of reproductive age.
2. Eliminate¹ congenital syphilis.
3. Control outbreaks² among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Queensland, the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia.

Public health action and response

It is acknowledged that significant work has been done individually by State and Territory Health services, primary health care and other community organisations to address rising rates of syphilis, including the investment in the enhanced response to the syphilis outbreaks in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The CDNA and BBVSS are, in collaboration, developing further priority public health actions, including those related to workforce and community engagement, to ensure progress is made towards reducing the incidence of syphilis and elimination of congenital syphilis in Australia. These actions will be provided to AHPPC for endorsement.

¹ The 2018-22 National STI Strategy and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander BBV and STI Strategy, define elimination of congenital syphilis as 'no new cases of congenital syphilis nationally notified for two consecutive years'.

² At the time of writing Queensland, the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia were the only jurisdictions with officially declared outbreak regions. New outbreak regions in other jurisdictions may be declared with endorsement from the CDNA, after which this target will be amended.

Surveillance and Monitoring Plan

Supporting this Strategic Approach is a National Syphilis Surveillance and Monitoring Plan that outlines the indicators that will be used to monitor progress towards achieving the specific syphilis targets.

Governance

The AHPPC, CDNA, BBVSS, in consultation with the Multijurisdictional Syphilis Outbreak Working Group and the National BBV and STI Surveillance Sub-Committee, will drive a nationally co-ordinated response to address rising rates of syphilis in Australia.