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Developing sexual health informational materials for college students

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2. Problem Identification



Lewiston, Maine is home to Bates College, an undergraduate institution of about 1800 students. Bates Health Services provides primary healthcare for most of these students. Among the most common issues that bring students to health services are concerns related to sexual health. Until recently, HIV Pre Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) was not available through Bates Health Services. Though the health center has recently adopted protocols for initiating PrEP, they have not advertised its availability and do not have informational material for interested students. There is concern that students at risk may not be aware that this service is now available to them. Furthermore, lack of availability in the past has damaged the trust of the LGBTQ student community in the ability of health services to address their sexual health needs. The Health Services is also lacking more general informational materials related to STI testing.



3. Public Health Cost

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are a growing concern in the US. Incidence of bacterial STIs is rising considerably in the US generally and in Maine specifically¹. Androscoggin County, in which Bates College is located, sees the highest incidence of gonorrhea and the second highest incidence of chlamydia in the state of Maine².

While HIV rates are down-trending nationwide, HIV remains the ninth leading cause of death for people aged 25-45. Incidence of HIV is highest among people age 20-29 and an estimated 51% of HIV+ individuals aged 13-24 are not aware of their serostatus. Populations who continue to be at increased risk for HIV infection include men who have sex with men and IV drug users³.



4. Community Perspectives and Support

Community contact: Kathy Morin, RN

Sexual health concerns are a common issue among students seeking care at the Bates Health services. Students typically do not come in for routine screening and preventative care visits, and so testing for STIs typically happens only when students are symptomatic. Many students are unaware that STI testing is recommended even if they are asymptomatic. Gonorrhea, chlamydia, and herpes are fairly common among the college community. The health center used to have materials available for students regarding STI testing, however in recent renovations and reorganization these materials were lost and currently no informational materials are available for students or are distributed from health services to other parts of campus.

Additionally, Health Services has only recently become prepared to prescribe PrEP; protocols were developed because of student interest. In one case, a young man came to the college health services in hopes of initiating PrEP before it was available, and their lack of preparedness was communicated to his peers in the LGBTQ student community, which has since developed some mistrust in the health center's ability to take care of their health needs and support their community. The staff have concerns that this has made some student less likely to seek our healthcare from them, and away at college there are few other options for efficient health care access. Health services does not currently have any informational materials related to PrEP.



5. Intervention and Methodology



Interviews were conducted with college health services staff to identify specific needs within the health center and the student community. Information regarding current recommendations about PreP and STI testing was collected, translated into language appropriate for non-medically educated people with attention towards gender neutral language and recognition of diverse sexual orientations, and formatted into informational brochures. Health services protocols were reviewed to ensure the content of student materials was consistent with these protocols. Final brochures were reviewed with health services staff to ensure they would meet their needs for educational materials.



6. Results and Response

Arrangements were made to have these materials printed and available for students both at the health center and at numerous other locations on campus including residence halls, student lounges, and student resource areas. Materials were well received by health services staff who were appreciative of having more educational materials that could be provided to students. They anticipate these being helpful tools in encouraging students to be proactive about their sexual health and make informed choices and protecting themselves and their partners from STIs.



7. Evaluation of Effectiveness

The results of this intervention will be largely qualitative. The staff at the health center anticipate an increased awareness of PrEP in students at high risk for HIV, and they hope that distribution of these materials will be a small part of rebuilding trust within the LGBTQ student community. Unfortunate timing with the beginning of the school year meant that I was not able to conduct a meeting with a student representative, so these materials lack input from the students they are directed at. Materials related to STI testing and protection will work best in the setting of a robust effort to encourage safer sex practices of all kinds, particularly infection prevention with barrier methods.



8. Recommendations for future interventions/projects:



A formal review of college STI rates may in the future allow for a more targeted education about STI protection. A future interview with students would allow revision of these materials to ensure they contain all the information that would be most useful to students, presented in an effective manner. Development of a broader sexual health curriculum sponsored by the college health services would enable more proactive education regarding sexual health and safer sex practices.



9. References

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