Syphilis outbreak sparks call for increased action

SHQ (Sexual Health Quarters) is committed to reducing incidences of syphilis amid recent outbreaks in WA and other States.

“Syphilis rates have increased significantly across the country, despite it having been almost eradicated 12 years ago. The epidemic has seen increased rates in Western Australia, particularly in the Kimberley and Pilbara regions, and now in urban centres like Perth,” said Dr Richelle Douglas, Medical Director.

“Syphilis can be treated in the early stages with antibiotics, but if left untreated can have devastating consequences. Around 15-30% of people infected with syphilis who don't get treatment will develop complications. In these late stages, the disease may damage a person’s brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones and joints. These problems can occur many years after the original, untreated infection.”

“Syphilis can also be passed from mother to baby in-utero; in Australia it is estimated that there have been seven cases of deaths associated with congenital syphilis, and this number may grow if the epidemic is not controlled,” she said.

“In order to address this devastating consequence, SHQ urges clinicians to consider testing for syphilis and other sexually transmissible infections (STIs) more than once in pregnancy in women who are from endemic areas, or who are at risk.”

“In addition, we advise all people who are sexually active and who have had sex without a condom to get tested. Condoms are still the best protection against STIs.”

Dr Douglas said that in response to the epidemic, SHQ had developed syphilis treatment protocols, and in addition to screening, was now able to offer syphilis treatment for simple cases.

“We are also pleased to be part of the Department of Health’s WA Syphilis Outbreak Response Group, who are working to develop a much-needed Syphilis Outbreak Action Plan for WA,” she said.

“We commend the Federal Government’s increased funding to tackle this important issue, as well as support syphilis awareness-raising campaigns such as those run by Young, Deadly and Free.”

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