

# Community Pharmacy: at the heart of public health

## Young People and Sex

England has the worst rates of sexually transmitted infections recorded, and they are still rising. Poor sexual health is a problem especially for young people; the prevalence of STIs continues to increase and 15-24 year olds - particularly young women - continue to be the group most affected in the UK. Of all 15-24 year olds diagnosed with an STI in 2009, around 1 in 10 will become re-infected within a year (1).

Pharmacies in Lambeth and Southwark have been providing an Emergency Hormonal Contraception service since 2000, in a bid to tackle the (then) 10,500 unintended pregnancies in the area. In the first year of the service, it was found that 50% of women accessed the service at the weekend or on Mondays, when it can be difficult to obtain appointments at family planning clinics or GP, a critical finding given that emergency contraception is most effective if taken within the first 24 hours after unprotected sex. Many young women access emergency contraception through pharmacies and in Lambeth and Southwark there are over 8,000 consultations in pharmacies every year (2).

Chlamydia is the most commonly diagnosed sexually transmitted infection (STI) in the UK, affecting both men and women. Untreated chlamydia can have serious long term health implications and may lead to infertility. The National Chlamydia Screening Programme, targeting 15-24 year olds, includes services commissioned through community pharmacy to extend choice and access. Young women visit pharmacies for a number of reasons, including buying makeup or to seek emergency contraception or buy pregnancy tests. A pilot study in NHS Southwark revealed that 16% of patients tested in pharmacy would not have been screened in any other setting (2).

In City and Hackney tPCT, a sexual health service is commissioned through community pharmacy, as part of their teenage pregnancy partnership, to increase access to emergency hormonal contraception especially to those under 26, and therefore reduce unwanted pregnancies. The service also refers hard to reach groups, especially young people, into mainstream contraceptive services, and signposts the availability of other services, thereby increasing numbers of young women accessing regular sexual health and family planning services.

The service also aims to decrease the incidence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among young women by raising awareness of the connection between unprotected sex and STIs and increasing the use of condoms by young people. An increase in both the screening rates for Chlamydia and gonorrhoea in sexually active young women between the ages of 16 and 25 and the screening for and access to treatment for STIs for young women and their partners is also included.

Over 10 years the teenage pregnancy rate dropped by 28% and the PCT is one of the most consistent performers in the country as teenage pregnancies have not risen.

Community pharmacies have contributed to these results and between 2005 and 2008, the number of EHC consultations doubled whereas the number of those for under 18s trebled. Pharmacies currently provide EHC consultations in Hackney, distributes test kits for chlamydia, and provides treatment for positive screens via a patient group direction (PGD) (3).



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Teenage conceptions are at a 20-year low (40 cases per 1,000 under-18s), but the rate is still high when compared with Western Europe (4). Around 40,000 young women become pregnant each year; three quarters of these pregnancies are unplanned and half end in an abortion.

In a survey about sexual health services for young people, one of the key improvements that were recommended was the greater access to services at weekends and evenings (5).

Community pharmacies are conveniently situated and open longer hours than most community healthcare services and have become an increasingly important venue for community sexual health services.

Access to emergency contraception is a common enhanced pharmacy service as pharmacies are open in the evenings and at weekends, with no need to book an appointment.

Improving access to and uptake of contraception amongst young people is one of the main priorities in the strategy to reduce rates of unintended conceptions amongst teenagers in North of Tyne. To accelerate reductions in teenage pregnancy, North Tyne has prioritised improving young people's access and uptake of effective contraception, with a particular focus on Long Acting Reversible Contraception (LARC), by building on the successful locally commissioned EHC scheme offered through community pharmacies. Access to a comprehensive range of sexual health services for clients aged 19 is now available through six community pharmacies and chlamydia screening, treatment, partner notification and onward referral into contraception services is also included. Pharmacies participating in the scheme are those located in an area of high teenage conception rates with limited availability of other contraceptive services and with a good uptake of free emergency contraception in under 18s (5).

In Manchester, all women who access a community pharmacy to request EHC are offered oral contraception to an approved protocol. In addition, if women are 24 years and below a Chlamydia screen and treatment is also offered (3).

## References

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- 3) Information from the PSNC Community Pharmacy Services database [www.psnc.org.uk](http://www.psnc.org.uk)
- 4) Our Health and wellbeing today. Department of Health (2010)
- 5) Teenage Pregnancy Strategy: Beyond 2010. Department of Health (2010)

