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Conceptual paper: Awareness and Risk Perception towards Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) Among Adolescents in Kuching and Kota Samarahan, Sarawak

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Abstract

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are on the rise in Sarawak with the age of those infected getting younger by year. Latest available data on reported cases of STIs is from a newsletter published by the Sarawak Health Department in March 2015 showing 26 cases of gonorrhoea and 3 cases of syphilis for Kuching while 8 cases of gonorrhoea and 2 cases of syphilis for Samarahan recorded for that month (Sarawak Weekly Epid News, 2015). Based on reviews of past studies it can be concluded that the level of awareness is still low despite the rising cases of STIs reported in Sarawak. A study by Catterall (1981) found gonorrhoea to be the most common infection affecting Sarawakians prior to 1981 and based on the current statistics, that has not changed. Knowledge on STIs among adolescents and youths is generally low to moderate, even among health sciences students (ElKalmi et. al, 2015; Soleymani et. al, 2015; Anwar et. al, 2010). The prevalence of pre-marital sex among adolescents (Awaluddin et. al, 2015; Manaf et. al, 2015; Ahmadian et. al, 2014; Anwar et. al, 2010) could be a factor in contributing to the rise of STIs infections. The Sexually Transmitted Disease Knowledge Questionnaire (STD-KQ) and the Health Belief Model are used in this study to gauge the level of awareness and risk perception among the adolescents in Kuching and Kota Samarahan. The focus of

this paper is to understand the level of awareness and knowledge of STIs among adolescents, to assess the attitudes of adolescents towards STIs, to determine the risk perception of adolescents concerning STIs, and to find out factors affecting level of awareness and risk perception of STI among adolescents.

Keywords: Sexually Transmitted Infections, Adolescents, Sarawak

Introduction

Sexually transmitted infections among adolescents and young adults Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) “are infections that are commonly/have a high probability of being spread from person to person through sexual contact” and is a more preferable term compared to sexually transmitted disease (STDs) as “some infections are curable and may not cause any symptoms” (Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), n.d.). According to statistics revealed by Datuk Fatimah Abdullah, the Sarawak Minister of Welfare, Women and Family Development, there are 683 cases of gonorrhoea reported in Sarawak in the year 2014 with 514 cases involving patients aged between 18 to 29 and 49 cases involving teenagers aged between 10 to 17 years old (“Gonorrhoea semakin membimbangkan”, 2015). Out of the 683 cases, Samarahan and Asajaya areas in Sarawak recorded 96 cases of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in the year 2014 with 64 cases of gonorrhoea involving youths aged 18 to 29 years old while the other 12 cases involved teenagers aged 10 to 17 years old (“Gonorrhoea semakin membimbangkan”, 2015). When the age of the patient is as young as 10 years old, or equivalent to Primary 4, it is an issue worth investigating.

As disclosed by Dr Ruzaina Mis (Mustafa, 2012) who is an Epidemiologist Officer from Pejabat Kesihatan Kuching, the statistics for STIs patients in Kuching showed that 40 of the STIs cases involved teenagers aged between 13 to 19 years old. The most common STIs reported are gonorrhoea, followed by syphilis with the former mostly contracted by single (unmarried) people (Chia, 2012). This also shows that the teenagers and youths are sexually active and thus, measures should be taken to gauge their awareness and knowledge of STIs, their attitude towards STIs, and also how they perceived themselves to be at risk of contracting STIs. Mail (2015) wrote a feature story in Borneo Post on the stigma of STDs and quoted a medical doctor who declined to be named saying that the three most common STDs in Kuching are herpes, HIV and viral hepatitis. Latest available data on reported cases of STIs is from a newsletter published by the Sarawak Health Department in March 2015 showing 26 cases of gonorrhoea and 3 cases of syphilis for Kuching while 8 cases of gonorrhoea and 2 cases of syphilis for Samarahan recorded for that month (Sarawak Weekly Epid News, 2015).

Due to the nature of transmission of the infections, STIs is still a taboo subject and most of those infected might not seek treatment at public hospitals or clinics and therefore the cases might not be recorded.

The magnitude of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in Malaysia is very much underrepresented. This is due to under-reporting and under diagnosis, asymptomatic manifestation of the disease as well as patients preferring to access the private healthcare facilities to treat STIs as opposed to seeking treatment at public hospitals and clinics. Some also prefer to self-treat through alternative medicine. Despite the existence of the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act of 1988 which requires reporting