PRESS RELEASE

NICE guidance calls for more to be done to halt the rise of sexually transmitted infections and prevent under 18 conceptions

Sexual health in the UK has deteriorated significantly over the last 12 years, with large increases in many STIs including Chlamydia (up 300%), gonorrhoea (up 200%) and HIV (up 300%). New guidance issued today by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) sets out what needs to be done to halt the rising numbers of infections and to prevent under 18 conceptions – of which the UK has the highest rates in Europe.

The guidance focuses on one-to-one interventions that aim to address the personal factors that influence an individual’s sexual behaviour in order to reduce the transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV, and to reduce the rate of under 18 conceptions, especially among vulnerable and at risk groups.

Commenting on the need for guidance, Professor Mike Kelly, Director of the Centre for Public Health Excellence at NICE said: “Since 1990, people are having sex for the first time at a younger age, a greater proportion of people have multiple partners, and a greater proportion of men report having had a same sex partner. But something can be done to improve the sexual health of the population, and this guidance from NICE will help health professionals working in the NHS and others working with young people, to understand which one-to-one interventions are effective and how they should be used particularly with those at high risk. The guidance complements current developments concerned with the asymptomatic screening of STIs such as the National Chlamydia Screening Programme and HIV testing which offers rapid and open testing.”
The guidance recommends that –

- Health professionals should identify individuals at high risk of contracting STIs using their sexual history. Opportunities for risk assessment may arise during consultations on contraception, pregnancy or abortion, and when carrying out a cervical smear test, offering an STI test or providing travel immunisation. Risk assessment could also be carried out during routine care or when a new patient registers.

- Health professionals should have one-to-one structured discussions with individuals at high risk of STIs (if trained in sexual health), or arrange for these discussions to take place with a trained practitioner. The discussions should be structured on the basis of behaviour change theories.

- Patients with an STI should be helped to get their partners tested and treated (partner notification), when necessary.

- Midwives and health visitors should regularly visit vulnerable women aged under 18 who are pregnant or who are already mothers and discuss with them and their partner (where appropriate) how to prevent or get tested for STIs and how to prevent unwanted pregnancies. Where appropriate, young women can be referred to relevant agencies, including services concerned with reintegration into education and work.

Dr Catherine Law of the UCL Institute of Child Health and Chair of the Public Health Interventions Advisory Committee at NICE says: “This guidance suggests better ways of addressing the problem of declining sexual health in our population than current practice in some areas. We recommend a clear focus on those most at risk such as those from disadvantaged communities, men who have sex with men, and vulnerable young people, with an emphasis on prevention in one-to-one structured advice and discussion.”

Dr Richard Ma, General Practitioner with a special interest in sexual health in Islington, London, says: “Many health professionals have a role to play in helping reduce STIs and under 18 pregnancies. Whilst many GPs are already doing a lot to help offer advice and support in this area, this guidance is about bringing care in all areas of the country up to the gold standard. With improved training, and the use of structured behavioural interventions targeted at the right groups of people, we can make a real difference to the sexual health of the population.”

Ends
Notes for editors

About NICE

1. The guidance documents are available on the NICE website at www.nice.org.uk from 00.01 on 28th February or on request form the NICE press office.

2. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) is the independent organisation responsible for providing national guidance on the promotion of good health and the prevention and treatment of ill health.

3. NICE produces guidance in three areas of health
   - public health – guidance on the promotion of good health and the prevention of ill health for those working in the NHS, local authorities and the wider public and voluntary sector
   - health technologies – guidance on the use of new and existing medicines, treatments and procedures within the NHS
   - clinical practice – guidance on the appropriate treatment and care of people with specific diseases and conditions within the NHS.