Goldfields SHAK Facebook—a new approach to providing sexual health advice

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Background: The Goldfields is located in the south-eastern corner of Western Australia and is the largest region in WA. The area is more than three times the size of Victoria and covers almost a third of WA’s total land mass.

The permanent regional population of the Goldfields is around 59 000, boosted by a significant number of workers who fly in from Perth to work on remote mining sites. Just over half the population lives in Kalgoorlie–Boulder (approx 32 000) and another quarter live in the Shire of Esperance (approx 13 000). It is estimated that 8% of the region’s population is of Aboriginal descent, compared to 3% for Western Australia as a whole. There are 17 Aboriginal communities within the Goldfields.

The concept of using social media and the establishment of a Sexual Health Facebook page was born in response to increasing rates of chlamydia in the Goldfields. Chlamydia is the most commonly notified sexually transmitted infection (STI) in Western Australia and is endemic in the Goldfields with males and females aged 15 to 24 years found to have the highest rates. Traditional methods of health education have limited success with this difficult-to-reach target group. But young adults in this age-group are very IT savvy—a talent worth utilising.

The Northern and Remote Country Health Service Public Health team have successfully established the first Facebook page in use within WA Department of Health (breaking new ground for others to follow).

Aim: To increase communication on sexual health matters to the target group of people aged 15–30 years, thus improving knowledge of sexual health and increasing the uptake of use of services in the region.

Background research: Current forms of social media were reviewed; with the conclusion being that social media can be an effective tool in reaching the target audience. A survey of local youth was conducted and the results showed 85% of those surveyed used Facebook on a daily basis; and furthermore 82% would use Facebook to access information on sexual health.

Results: Goldfields SHAK was launched in February 2012, 12 months after the original proposal was submitted. This innovative initiative has been highly successful, especially within the hard-to-reach population many of whom are Aboriginal. Continuity is important; staff turnover can be a challenge within the region and Facebook allowed for this. The process of establishing the Facebook page, the running of the program (including safety, quality and risk) and the results to date (successes) will be shared in the presentation.