

Rural young people's perspective of sexual health

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Background: Rates of sexually transmitted infections are increasing. Rural young people are vulnerable to engaging in unprotected sex where access to sexual health services is low.

Aim: To understand perspectives of sexual health and safe sex among young people living in rural communities in northern Victoria.

Methods: A series of eight focus groups were conducted with young men and women from a rural area in northern Victoria. Young people were recruited from two football and netball clubs in small towns as well as a gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender/intersex group in a regional centre. Young people were asked about their use of health services for sexual health and their adoption of safe sex messages. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed and then thematically analysed.

Relevance: Sexual health is important for the health and wellbeing of young people. Young, rural residents' understanding of sexual health and safe sex messages provides important insight into how these young people practice safe sex. From this, recommendations for improving sexual among rural young people can be drawn.

Findings: Young people spoke about sexual health in ways that differed between genders and among older and younger age groups. Young people were concerned about pregnancy and women used health services for contraception. Beyond this, their knowledge of sexual health was limited and their use of local health services for sexual health was rare, particularly for prevention of sexually transmissible infections. Access to youth friendly health services was key to the use of sexual health services. Their talk reflected a general lack of engagement with sexual health and safe sex messages.

Discussion and conclusions: Young people appeared to not want to engage with sexual health and safe sex messages. The focus on sexual relationships was focused on gendered understandings of sex and social pressure to conform to sexual behaviours. The lack of readiness to engage with these messages and adopt sexual health messages in their behaviours was concerning. The need to develop sexual health and safe sex messages in ways that rural young people will hear is overdue. This study recommends that safe sex messages to rural young people be reconsidered.