



ROYAL COLLEGE OF
PHYSICIANS OF IRELAND

**Submission of the RCPI Policy Group on Sexual
Health to '*Your Health is Your Wealth: a
Policy Framework for a Healthier Ireland
2012 - 2020*'**

30 September 2011



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Introduction

Sexual health is an important aspect of health and well-being. It is vital that people have the information, confidence and the means to make choices that are right for them. Provision and delivery of appropriate sexual health services will enable people to develop positive relationships to protect themselves and their partners from infections and unintended pregnancy.

RCPI Policy Group in Sexual Health

In December 2008, RCPI organised a public meeting aimed at promoting sexual health and well-being in Ireland. This was a successful meeting, well attended and attracted significant media attention. The meeting identified the role RCPI should play in continuing to educate and inform the public on relevant issues in this area, and provided further evidence to the additional role RCPI could play in providing guidance and clarity on sexual health issues to government, patient advocacy groups and other agencies. **Subsequently**, an RCPI Policy Group on Sexual Health **was** convened to advise RCPI on how to move forward in this area. The policy group consists of multi-disciplinary representatives from medical specialties, sexual health interest groups and sexual health experts.

Submission

There have been significant improvements in the sexual health of people living in Ireland, for example: persistent decreases in teenage pregnancy rates, reductions in teenage abortion rates and abortion in general, improving rates of contraceptive use at first sexual intercourse (89% females and 88% of males reporting use) and improvements in condom use with 82% of 18-24 year olds reporting condom use [1].

However there has also been a continuous rise in sexually transmitted infections (STIs), for example: the number of *Chlamydia trachomatis* cases notified in Ireland in 2009 (5781) is more than treble the number notified in 2002 [2]. While increased STI testing and the use of more sensitive testing methodologies may account for a proportion of this increase, the rise in STIs is evidence of the continuing need to improve the sexual health of our population.

The RCPI Policy Group on Sexual Health is therefore advocating the inclusion of sexual health as a key topic in the public health policy, *Your Health is Your Wealth: a Policy Framework for a Healthier Ireland 2012 – 2020*. Strategies for tackling the wider determinants of health should also be included in this policy.

The impact of wider determinants (social, educational and economic) on sexual health outcomes has been well documented. Social exclusion, low educational involvement and attainment and being a child of a teenage mother have all been identified as key determinants of teenage pregnancy and earlier sexual debut' [5]. In addition, teenage pregnancy can 'act as a marker of social and economic disadvantage and as a cause of further disadvantage' [3]. Interventions aimed at

tackling these wider determinants can impact on biological and behavioural sexual health outcomes [3].

The RCPI Policy Group on Sexual Health supports guidance issued by the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) on Chlamydia control in Europe; a 'building blocks' approach [4].

This guidance outlines options for Chlamydia control in "a stepwise approach to ensure that prevention and patient management are in place before complex interventions, such as screening, are considered":

- A. Primary prevention: Health promotion and education, school programmes, condom distribution
- B. Case management: Diagnostics, patient and partner management, routine case surveillance
- C. Opportunistic testing: Testing routinely offered to specified group(s) of people attending clinical services (needs to be preceded by and matched with the establishment and easy accessibility of STI case management services)
- D. Screening programme: Organised provision of Chlamydia testing to a substantial proportion of a defined population

The Policy Group agrees with the ECDC, that effective resourcing and implementation of national STI control programmes require leadership and commitment from healthcare policy makers.

In line ECDC guidance, the Policy Group believes that:

- Sexual health educational programmes need to be consistent, needs-led, integrated and prioritised within the curriculum of primary and post-primary schools. Existing programmes (e.g. SPHE) need to be supported.
- A core curriculum on sexual and reproductive health needs to be developed for medical undergraduates and Non Consultant Hospital Doctors (within their respective training programme).
- Standardised National Guidelines for the management of STIs should be the accepted practice of all medical practitioners.
- Access to community STI testing, and support, needs to be increased. There needs to be:
 - Equitable access to laboratory testing, such as Chlamydia urine testing, which is not available in all HSE areas
 - Regional Health advisers to support GPs, Practice nurses, patients [5]

- The inclusion of under-eighteen year olds in research on STI rates needs to be investigated (currently they are excluded, which hampers evidence).

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