

# SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS



the naked truth

A STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS DOCUMENT



## Message from the Minister

As part of our government's goal of achieving a healthy society, the Department of Health and Social Services is committed to providing information, education and ongoing support to professionals, educators, parents and youth to ensure accurate and up-to-date information, educational opportunities and the very best health care services are available to prevent and control sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in the Northwest Territories.

Unfortunately, our statistics are showing that the rate of STIs in the NWT is nine times higher than the national average. STIs are an extremely serious problem among NWT youth and children. These alarming facts indicate a need for better education, awareness and programs to deal more effectively with issues surrounding sexual health. Greater involvement of peers, parents, education and community leaders will also be required if we hope to succeed in bringing our rates down in a sustained way.

This document not only highlights the seriousness of the concerns and possible long terms effects of STIs, but most importantly identifies specific strategies to improve the sexual health of NWT residents, especially for our youth.

As Minister of Health and Social Services I am pleased to present this Strategic Directions document, which is aimed at preventing and controlling STIs in the NWT and working together to increase awareness about sexual health issues.

With a concentrated effort, we can at last entertain the possibility of bringing our rates down to below the national average before the end of this decade.



J. Michael Miltenberger  
Minister of Health and Social Services

## Introduction

This NWT STI **Strategic Directions** document describes the key elements of a comprehensive approach to prevent and control sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in the Northwest Territories.

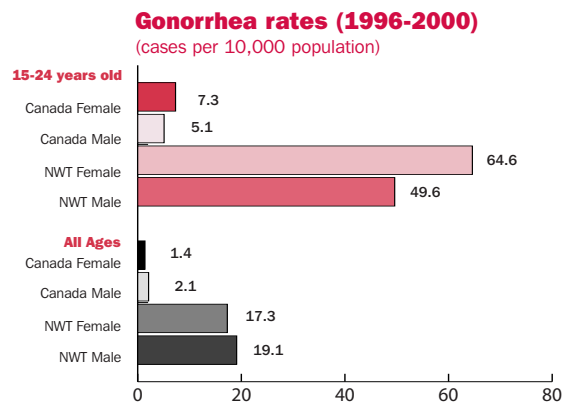
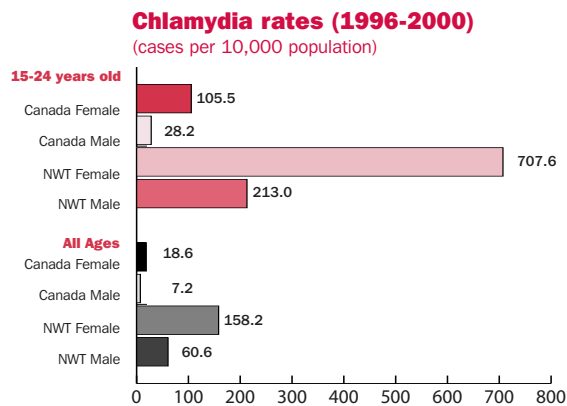
It draws its inspiration from the proceedings of a workshop held in Yellowknife in January 2004 and a series of consultations that were held with local and regional elders, community leaders and health care professionals.

The discussions from this workshop have been summarized in a document titled *“A Five-Year Strategy For Working Together To Prevent Sexually Transmitted Infections”*.

NWT STI **Strategic Directions** identifies the goals, objectives and actions that will aid in raising the awareness of the critical situation surrounding the marked increase in sexually transmitted diseases affecting our youth.

## Background

- The NWT has the highest rate of gonorrhoea in the country and the second highest rate of chlamydia.
- The NWT has had consistently higher rates of chlamydia than those reported in the rest of Canada, increasing from 1330/100,000 in 1998 to 1670 in 2002. The gonorrhoea rates have increased in last two years by 300%.
- Over the last five years STI reports have increased by 30% in the 15-24 age group.
- Many residents of NWT who are infected with Chlamydia and Gonorrhoea go untreated. This is due to the fact that STIs may not cause any symptoms over long periods of time. Therefore, STIs continue to circulate in the community.
- Other factors include having unprotected sexual activity under the influence of drugs or alcohol and being unable or unwilling to divulge the name of contacts so that the appropriate clinical follow up may be done.
- HIV/AIDS is .3/100,000, which is comparable to the rest of Canada; however, risk factors contributing to the increase in sexually transmitted diseases also contribute risk for transmission of HIV.
- STIs can cause infertility, ectopic pregnancies, premature births and damage to unborn children.
- Although hepatitis C is seldom transmitted sexually, it shares several risk factors with STIs.



### What are Sexually Transmitted Infections?

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) include chlamydia, gonorrhoea, trichomonas, pubic lice and scabies, genital herpes, genital warts, hepatitis B, syphilis and HIV/AIDS. The symptoms of STIs vary widely although not all are obvious and a person can have an STI without any symptoms at all. Symptoms may include itchiness, sores or rashes in the genital or anal areas, discharge from the penis or vagina, and a burning feeling when urinating.

### Why Worry About STIs?

STIs can cause serious life-long problems such as infertility, tubal pregnancies, premature births and damage to unborn children, as is the case with HIV which can result in disease and death. STIs spread quickly and can create hardships for individuals, families, and communities. STIs can destroy the health, social well-being and connectedness of communities.

### STIs and Violence and Abuse

Violence and abuse, including non-consensual sex, are long-standing and serious issues in many NWT communities. STIs can be transmitted in these acts of violence and may be reasons behind the discomfort, shyness, embarrassment, shame, or guilt associated with discussion of sex and sexual behaviour. Violent acts, the illicit sex trade and substance abuse appear to be on the rise throughout the NWT.

### Goals, Objectives and Actions

The following pages explain the 5 goals, 10 objectives, and 39 actions that were identified during the January 2004 workshop held in Yellowknife. These goals, objectives and actions with the ongoing support of professionals, educators, parents and youth, will help to achieve the possibility of bringing our STI rates, which are now 9 times higher than the national average, down to below the national average before the end of this decade.

## Clinical Practice and Treatment

### Goal 1:

Ensure appropriate and effective clinical practices and treatment of STIs throughout the NWT.

### Objective 1:

Establish and implement protocols to guide consistent health practitioner responses to STIs.

### Actions:

1. Develop, implement, and monitor policies for improved screening of men and women, tracing contacts, notifying partners, notifying relevant health professionals, and monitoring treatment.

#### *Screening*

- a) Inform public of risk of undiagnosed STIs.
- b) Ensure health care providers are informed of the seriousness and consequences of STIs.
  - i. Outreach
  - i. Improved lab tools.

#### *Contact tracing*

- a) Health care providers to do contact tracing for all STIs.
- b) Gaining clients' understanding and trust.
- c) Ensure sexual history is completed and accurate information obtained to identify contacts.
- d) Provide adequate follow-up education and treatment to identified contacts.

#### *Partner Notification*

- a) Provide options to clients for active or passive notification but ensure it is carried out.

#### *Notifying relevant health professionals*

- a) Develop and implement policy and infrastructure that ensure notification and follow-up by health care providers.

#### *Reporting STIs to Chief Medical Health Officer*

- a) Ensure reporting of all STIs' diagnoses in timely manner to the Office of the Chief Medical Health Officer.
- b) Educate health care providers on appropriate use of reporting forms.
- c) Ensure completion of epidemiological and contact information.

#### *Monitoring the effectiveness and appropriateness of treatments/responses*

- a) Ensuring that follow-ups are carried out.
- b) Track infected individuals to ensure the treatment is effective.

2. Develop, implement and monitor a clinical practice protocol to guarantee client privacy, confidentiality and safety:
  - a) Provide clients with opportunity to sign confidentiality forms.
  - b) Ensure that clients know their rights upon diagnosis of an STI.
  - c) Explain to clients STI notification process for contacts and assure them that their anonymity is protected from the general public.
3. Get health care providers interested in solving the problem and consistently using the policies and protocols for responding to STIs:
  - a) Health care providers are to educate clients on prevention against STIs.
  - b) Ensure health care providers are providing epidemiological reports on all cases.
4. Standardize health care provider orientation materials:
  - a) Ensure health care providers are aware of the rates of STIs in the NWT.
  - b) Ensure health care providers are informed of new clinical practice guidelines for preventing and controlling STIs.
5. All medical and support staff be given an orientation upon hiring, stressing codes of ethics respecting confidentiality:
  - a) All health care employees and auxiliary staff are to understand and sign an oath of confidentiality.
6. Regularly institute in-service sessions on the clinical practice and treatment of STIs:
  - a) All health care staff should have an understanding of STIs and their prevention.

### **Objective 2:**

Improve access to and efficiency of STI diagnosis and treatment in all NWT communities.

### **Actions:**

1. Define the methods and responsibility for providing confidential and accessible STI screening, treatment and follow-up services in each community:
  - a) Ongoing training in all communities of professional health care staff.
  - b) All staff should have knowledge of client rights to confidentiality and the consequences if they are breached.
  - c) Develop a professional supportive atmosphere for front-line clinicians and outreach staff.
2. Link STI diagnostic and treatment services with STI education and prevention activities:
  - a) Provide education as a part of diagnosis and treatment regime.
  - b) Ensure clients understand risk associated with unprotected sex and provide options for preventing the transmission of STIs.



3. Establish a central STI resource centre linked to the Tele-Care NWT call service that will be a source of information and support:
  - a) Establish easy to access clinics on the model of the Yellowknife sexual health clinic in all larger communities.
  - b) Provide outreach in a discrete, non-threatening way to high-risk populations, especially on weekends and after-hours.

## Community Prevention

### **Goal 2:**

Assist community members to avoid risky sexual behaviors and make healthy lifestyle choices.

### **Objective 1:**

Support a variety of youth-oriented and youth-driven healthy lifestyle initiatives.

### **Actions:**

1. Establish and resource an organizing committee to host an annual NWT-wide youth conference on STIs, to:
  - a) Develop youth awareness of STIs.
  - b) Give youth an opportunity to voice concerns and help with STI awareness.
  - c) Engage youth to 'open up' about sex, sexual behaviors and STIs.
  - d) Support youth-driven initiatives, such as peer education and youth educational activities.
2. Assist student councils and other youth groups to regularly engage role models/guest speakers to address the issue of STIs.
3. Resource youth-serving agencies to pursue sustainable community-based healthy lifestyle projects, forums and workshops.
4. Mobilize, train and support youth workers/helpers.

**Objective 2:**

Implement community-specific STI prevention strategies to empower vulnerable members to avoid risky sexual activities and exploitation.

**Actions:**

1. Establish and support multi-generational, interagency STI community teams to name and confront perpetrators of abuse.
2. Recognize the seriousness of, and act on the problem of, STIs:
  - a) Engage youth in school presentations/seminars to discuss sex, sexual behaviors and STIs.
3. Work together with youth to take action on teen and adult alcohol and drug use and other circumstances that put youth at risk of contracting STIs.
4. Work together to support existing healthy living action plans and initiatives:
  - a) Support youth to live STI-free lives.

**Objective 3:**

Enable youth to make informed lifestyle decisions.

**Actions:**

1. Make condoms and information on condom use widely and regularly available in all NWT communities:
  - a) Ensure easy and regular accessibility to condoms in public buildings, high schools, youth facilities, bars and restaurants.
2. Expand parenting courses to normalize sex talk:
  - a) Develop an STI component to be included in parenting courses.
3. With advice of youth, develop a series of STI prevention resource kits:
  - a) Develop a standardized kit for communities including information, materials, where to access materials, ideas for activities/techniques on how to talk about STIs comfortably.
4. Regularly hold training to enhance skills to effectively use resource kits:
  - a) Develop training sessions for front-line staff to effectively use STI resource kits.
5. Continuously update the materials:
  - a) Ensure that new information on STIs is added to resource kits when available.

## Health Promotion

### **Goal 3:**

Implement a sustained STI awareness and education campaign.

### **Objective 1:**

Implement multi-media educational and awareness activities targeting youth.

#### **Actions:**

1. Engage NWT youth in developing a full range of youth-friendly education materials:
  - a) Establish a youth group/committee to help with the development of educational material aimed at youth, such as videos, booklets, TV commercials on the problem of STIs in the NWT.
  - b) Develop an STI awareness campaign targeting the youth, general public service providers and community leaders, to be presented in NWT official languages.
2. Make multimedia materials more widely available:
  - a) Provide media and communities with reports on the state and consequences of STIs on a regular basis.
3. Sustain the profile of multimedia materials and messages.

### **Objective 2:**

Implement educational and awareness activities targeting parents, elders and community leaders.

#### **Actions:**

1. Engage youth to develop an educational video and handbook for parents, elders and community leaders on the serious problem of STIs.
2. Train and support youth to lead community workshops.
3. Provide support to parents, elders and community leaders to help them talk to and teach their children and youth about STIs:
  - a) Promote normalcy of discussing sex, sexual behavior and STIs.

**Goal 4:**

Develop capacity among community-based front-line workers to lead STI education and awareness activities.

**Objective 1:**

Strengthen school-based sex education and health programming.

**Actions:**

1. Update and expand the NWT school health curriculum:
  - a) Ensure updated health curriculum is provided to all schools with a mandatory STI component that is closely tied to other units, such as HIV/AIDS.
  - b) Initiate the sexual health program at younger grades such as grade 5 to 8 to teach children about STIs before they become sexually active.
2. Take a community team approach to consistently deliver the health curriculum in all NWT schools:
  - a) STI information provided to schools should be in plain language and taught to students in an interesting and engaging way.
  - b) Departments of Education, Culture and Employment and Health and Social Services to work together to deliver the sexual health program.
3. Regularly provide training to educators in the delivery of the health curriculum including the STI component:
  - a) Ensure school counselors are equipped with knowledge of STIs and their prevention.
  - b) Develop training workshops on the delivery of health curriculum including STI component.
  - c) Workshop to be delivered to all teachers who teach about STIs.
4. Monitor the delivery of the health curriculum to ensure consistency of messages and information throughout the NWT:
  - a) Regular school audits to ensure sexual health curriculum is being taught.

**Objective 2:**

Train front-line workers (including peer workers) to educate the public about STIs.

**Actions:**

1. Develop a multi-faceted range of standardized training opportunities.

## Community Involvement

### Goal 5:

Enable community ownership and responsibility for the health and well-being of members.

### Objective 1:

Engage leaders and decision makers in taking action on STIs in their communities.

### Actions:

1. Sponsor regular radio phone-in shows about STIs:
  - a) Develop public awareness of STIs through media sources.
  - b) Provide public with knowledge/understanding of the impact of STIs.
  - c) Provide public with discreet ways of asking personal questions. This provides anonymity when people are embarrassed to ask physician/nurses.
2. Support community champions or advocates:
  - a) Regularly bring community leaders together and discuss the problem of STIs.
  - b) Increase citizen discussion and actions on STIs through meetings and more awareness campaigns.
  - c) Identify a high-profile person who will speak out on the issues of STIs.
3. Ensure there is interagency planning to incorporate STI initiatives:
  - a) Involve local citizens in creating healthy communities and preventing and controlling STIs.
4. Publicly request leaders and decision makers to participate in STI prevention initiatives:
  - a) Community support for health promotion activities.

STI

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## **Conclusion:**

This Strategic Directions document presents a long-term vision of a STI-free Northwest Territories and a roadmap to get us there. It identifies a set of goals, objectives and actions that must be continuously pursued to arrest and reverse the past decade's increase in sexually transmitted infections. By working together and supporting one another, and with an adequate level of resources, this vision can be achieved and sustained over the long-term.



