

Studies will assess gaps in sexual health services

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Fort St. John's booming young population may be rolling in the dough, but those who are recklessly rolling in the hay are setting themselves up for a whole lot of trouble.

The rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are higher in the northeast than in the rest of the province – and they're growing rapidly – while testing options and preventative education services are lagging.

As such, two unrelated studies are assessing the gaps in the region's sexual health services; one currently underway by the University of British Columbia and another planned for the new year by Positive Living North in Prince George.

The UBC study is looking at the barriers for youth when it comes to sexual testing and education. Graduate student Shira Goldenberg has visited the Energetic City to interview youth and talk to health service providers.

"Right now the biggest gap is the population changes and how those are disproportionate to the growing needs of young people," she said. "The testing services are quite minimal... and they're not necessarily accessible to that population at this point."

A 2004 study showed that instances of chlamydia in the northeast exceeded the provincial average by about a third. Local authorities are also concerned about rising rates of Hepatitis C and HIV.

Goldenberg's findings are preliminary, as she is still in the data collection stage, but she said that issues like work schedules, clinic hours, availability of appointments, and even bus access are affecting the ability of youth to get tested for STIs – and if they're not tested or even educated about the possibility of infection, the chance of their unknowingly passing it on grows.

Socially, the busy bar scene and culture of "binge partying" when workers are on short-term and long-term breaks from the oilpatch contributes to the rise of STIs as well, Goldenberg noted.

Her study, which is funded by the B.C. Medical Services Foundation, fits into a larger one being conducted by her supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Jean Shoveller, that is looking at similar issues in Vancouver, Richmond, Prince George, and Quesnel.

Shoveller anticipated the Fort St. John study will show that more funding is needed for the health services in the region.

"The impacts of boom, both demographically and socially, from a health perspective is I think perhaps pushing the (health system) to a point where they need an investment to help them be in a more supported position to respond as quickly and responsibly as possible to this emerging issue," she said.

Positive Living North, an organization in Prince George that educates the public about HIV/AIDS, is currently recruiting someone to map out the harm-reduction services and do community readiness assessments in the northeast. Regional HIV/HCV coordinator Jamey Dye said she is anticipating the study will find a huge need for more of those services.

"The next step would be to start strategizing and to start implementing the outcomes, say if a community is in need of education and awareness," she said.

Dr. Charl Badenhorst, Northern Health's medical health officer for the northeast, said in a previous interview that more education is definitely needed for residents – and so is more testing.

"We've asked to have a system in place to do these testings," he said. "It's not easy to break down the numbers. We need more data."