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GENITAL ULCERS IN WOMEN

SIR,—An association between genital ulcers and HIV infection has been reported for homosexual men,[1] heterosexual men,[2] and women.[3,4] The high prevalence of genital ulcers is thought to be one reason for the greater heterosexual spread of HIV in Africa.[5] Thus, the prevention of ulcers may reduce the risk and slow the sexual transmission of the virus. The results of a survey on genital ulcers in women are shown in the table. We asked clinicians familiar to us to make a clinical diagnosis on 100 consecutive patients.

Among clinics for sexually transmitted diseases (STD) the highest prevalence was in Bangladesh (29%); of the 29 genital ulcers, 24 were syphilis, 4 were chancroid, and 1 was from scratching. Colombia had a prevalence of 25% (10 caused by yeast, 9 by herpes, 5 chancroid, 1 from scratching, 1 folliculitis). The two main causes of ulcer in Sri Lanka were herpes and syphilis, while in Zimbabwe chancroid and herpes dominated. In Kenya 10 of 13 ulcers were chancroid and 3 were from syphilis whereas in Thailand, Panama, and USA the leading cause of ulcers was herpes with no syphilis or chancroid. The ulcers seen in the prenatal clinic in Indonesia were caused by yeast infections, and most ulcers seen in the US gynaecological clinic were herpetic. Ulcers on the external genitalia accounted for 75% of the ulcers. 92% of herpes, 92% of chancroid, and 78% of syphilis cases had an external ulcer.

PREVALENCE OF GENITAL ULCER IN WOMEN BY COUNTRY AND CLINIC TYPE

Country	% (and no studied) with genital ulcer in clinic of type			Total
	P/Gyn	FP	STD	
Bangladesh	0 (100)	0 (101)	29 (100)	9·6 (301)
Brazil	2 (100)	5 (100)	..	3·5 (200)
Colombia	..	..	25·5 (102)	25·5 (102)
Dominica	1 (100)	0 (100)	5 (100)	2 (300)
Egypt	3·3 (120)	2·5 (120)	..	2·9 (240)
Indonesia	20 (100)	0 (100)	5 (100)	8·3 (300)
Kenya	..	..	13 (100)	13 (100)
Mali	7·9 (240)	7 (100)	..	7·7 (340)
Panama	5 (100)	0 (100)	1·3 (160)	1·9 (360)
Peru	1 (100)	3·1 (160)	..	2·3 (260)
Philippines	0 (120)	0 (120)	0 (120)	0 (360)
Sri Lanka	1 (100)	0·8 (120)	20·8 (120)	7·9 (340)
Thailand	1 (120)	3·3 (120)	6·6 (106)	3·5 (346)
USA	10 (100)	0 (100)	3 (100)	4·3 (300)
Zimbabwe	..	..	18·4 (207)	18·4 (207)
Total	4·5 (1400)	1·9 (1341)	11·6 (1315)	6·0 (4056)

P/Gyn = prenatal/gynaecological clinics, FP = family planning clinics, STD = sexually transmitted diseases clinics

If the rapid spread of HIV in some areas is in part attributable to the high prevalence of genital ulcers, these findings suggest that many areas of the world are susceptible to rapid spread once HIV is introduced. Some countries in our survey have a low prevalence of HIV but a high prevalence of genital ulcer. Such countries should consider a programme to prevent genital ulcers before HIV becomes prevalent. This survey also shows that we need more information on the prevalence and aetiology of genital ulcers.

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