Chlamydia: A Growing Epidemic in Kent County, MI

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NURS 350

Abstract

The incidence of Chlamydia, which is a sexually transmitted disease, has been steadily increasing in Kent County, Michigan. Women, ages 15-24, are particularly affected according to the data. Symptoms are often silent in women and go unnoticed, which may account for the increased rates. The population of Kent County includes many college-aged persons related to being home to several college campuses. The Social Ecological Model, a behavioral model, can be used to further explain the elevated incidence rates in Kent County. Community groups, as well as other resources, are available to offer education and testing to the people in the area.

Chlamydia: A Growing Epidemic in Kent County, MI

While conducting an internet review of the statistics pertaining to Kent County, MI, the rise in cases of Chlamydia stood out. Kent County, MI contributes to this rise. The Michigan Department of Community Health (MDCH) reported 46,338 cases of the disease in 2009, (MDCH, 2011). According to the data, Chlamydia proves to be a problem for the state of Michigan, and more acutely, Kent County.

**Analysis**

**Benchmarks**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there were 160.2 cases of Chlamydia reported in 1990 and 409.2 cases reported in 2009 in Kent County, MI. In addition, 50, 430 cases were reported by the State of Michigan in 2010 with Kent County being responsible for 3,225 or 15.6% of those cases. Males were reported to represent 13,129 of the cases for the state and 1, 005 of the Kent County cases. Females were responsible for 37,178 of the cases for the state and 2,217 of the Kent County cases (CDC, 2010).

**Contributing Factors**

There are many college-based institutions located in Kent County where more risky behavior can be noted. There were 2,314 cases reported for the ages of 15-24 in Kent County for 2010 with 1,681 of them being female compared to 633 being male, (Kent County Health Department, KCHD, 2011). The difference in statistical figures could be related to the possible symptoms. The symptoms, because they are often silent, go unnoticed in women, (CDC, 2011). Other factors that contribute to the statistics may be related to access to health care. In Kent County, 14.5% of adults, ages 18-65, do not have health care coverage compared to 13.7% of adults in Michigan and 17% of adults in the United States, (Kent County Health Department, KCHD, 2008). In relation to the accuracy of these statistics, many cases go undiagnosed due to the lack of health coverage and symptoms.

**Social Ecological Model**

The Social Ecological Model as defined by Harkness & DeMarco (2011), “includes consideration for how social, cultural, economic, political, environmental, organizational and neighborhood factors influence health behaviors and health status within a community,” (p. 139). This model may be used to explain the rise in cases of Chlamydia in Kent County. Kent County, as stated previously, has many college-based institutions located in the area. The affected population, which includes individuals ages fifteen to twenty four, would be considered of college age. Social, political, environmental, organizational, and neighborhood influences are what drives the actions of college-aged persons.

In addition, “behavior is a result of the knowledge, values, and beliefs of people, as well as numerous social influences,” and, “social influences include relationships, social support networks, and community structure,” (Harkness & DeMarco, p. 79). Relationships and social networks are of increased importance, especially to college age persons. Every student wants to fit-in with their peers and are more likely to take part in risky behaviors in order to achieve this. This model highlights all aspects of life related to decisions, lifestyles, and actions people make individually and as a community.

**Existing Resources**

According to the accessKent website, Kent County holds clinics that offer free testing for sexually transmitted diseases, or STD’s, including clinical, screening, and educational services in order to attempt to reduce the number of cases. The health department conducts age appropriate educational presentations on prevention of STD’s. They also hold educational sessions for health care providers to give these professionals the information that can be appropriately discussed during risk assessments, risk reduction, counseling and when providing referral services to patients. This provides the professionals with information that can be used during risk assessments. The goal is to promote responsible sexual behaviors, strengthen the community, increase access to quality services to prevent STD’s, and to control the complications, (accessKent, 2011).

The resources provided by Kent County are considered adequate. Information is provided to not only the individuals, but also health care providers. Having a free clinic is a benefit for the community and the health department has programs in place to promote responsible sexual behaviors. The availability of free testing and free clinics may be a contributing factor to the high number of cases of Chlamydia. “The continuing increase in reported cases of Chlamydia infection likely represents the expansion of screening for this infection,” (Harness & DeMarco, 2011). There is also an increase in surveillance of Chlamydia and the reporting of cases.

**Community Nursing Intervention**

According to Harkness & DeMarco (2011), “infectious diseases are the leading causes of death in much of the world today, and they are the leading killers of children and young people worldwide,” (p. 238). Even though there has been a movement in the United States toward prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, which are infectious diseases, the number of cases are still rising. One of the objectives for Healthy People 2020, as stated in Harkness & Demarco (2011), is to, “reduce the proportion of adolescents and young adults with *Chlamydia* *trachomatis* infections,” (p. 253).

Community health nursing interventions can start with primary prevention of the infectious process. Primary prevention can include the health education and prevention classes, as well as information provided by the nurses. Testing of individuals at clinics is also included in this level of prevention. Nursing can also be involved in secondary prevention through treatment options after an individual has been diagnosed.

**Multidisciplinary Approach**

Many different disciplines may be involved in addressing the issue of the increasing rise in cases of Chlamydia in Kent County. Nurses that work at the free clinics provide confidential counseling, testing and treatment. Those individuals that come in with serious symptoms may be referred to a physician, (accessKent, 2011). In addition, volunteers often give their time to work at these free clinics. School counselors are also involved in addressing the problem by guiding the students in the right direction. Most college campuses have their own physician and nursing staff available to students. These clinics provide information on prevention, treatment, and counseling to the students.

**Community Groups**

Kent County offers a variety of groups and organizations that can be useful in addressing the problem. Planned Parenthood offers testing and education opportunities on how to prevent sexually transmitted diseases. Free testing and education are necessary tools used in the fight against the spread of this disease.

Community Family Partnership, or CFP, provides access to programs and support to individuals and families to meet the needs of the children in the community. This system of care strives to, “maximize the effectiveness of the use of available resources in the community by coordinating efforts, blending flexible funding and eliminating redundancies, inefficiencies, barriers, and gaps,” (accessKent, 2011). CFP could help to organize and put together the funding to help keep these free clinics going. Their goal is to support the individual children of the community and reduce barriers.

Kent County Coordinated School Health Program, or KCCSHP, is interested in improving the health of the students in the schools of Kent County. Along with the KCCHD, “their mission is to promote healthy behaviors of students and create a healthy, positive learning environment,” (accessKent, 2011). This program could be used in the schools to promote education to make the students aware of the upward trend of this disease in youth. Education needs to start with the youth before they become statistics.

**Problem Statement**

Young women, age 15-24, are at an increased risk for Chlamydia infection related to increased sexual activity without adequate knowledge of consequences and available resources, as evidenced by an increase in statistics for that age group as compared to others. The population that are at greatest risk for Chlamydia are noted to be between the ages of 15 and 24. It is thought that this is correlated with the increased sexual activity for this age group. Persons in this age group need to be further educated on the risk factors and prevention strategies. If the intervention of education is appropriate, then the cases of Chlamydia should decrease in Kent County.

**Conclusion**

According to statistics, there is a growing rise in the cases of Chlamydia in Kent County, MI. In particular, the young women of the county are affected by the sexually transmitted disease. Kent County provides free health clinics and screenings currently to its residents, but it is thought that more can be done to educate this community.

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