

**ashm**Australasian Society for HIV, Viral Hepatitis
and Sexual Health Medicine

Asia-Pacific experts meet in Auckland to discuss challenges facing sexual and reproductive health in the region

MEDIA RELEASE

THURSDAY 1 NOVEMBER — AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND

Health experts from across the Asia Pacific will gather in Auckland from 1–3 November for the 2018 [IUSTI Asia Pacific Sexual Health Congress](#), to discuss the major challenges facing sexual and reproductive health in the region.

The conference is hosted by the Australasian Society for HIV, Viral Hepatitis and Sexual Health Medicine (ASHM), and is a joint meeting of the International Union for Sexually Transmitted Infections — Asia Pacific, the NZ Sexual Health Society and the Australasian Sexual Health Alliance (ASHA).

Ahead of the conference, ASHM is highlighting key themes and research in this year's program, including the results of New Zealand's first comprehensive sexual health survey, the latest trends in HIV and STI diagnoses in the region, and research into how to counter anti-vaccination arguments.

"This is a truly international conference, and our region is working together to lead the way globally when it comes to understanding and overcoming challenges to delivering sustainable sexual health services," said ASHM CEO Alexis Apostolellis.

"Not only will this conference bring together the diverse countries of our region to showcase our collaboration when it comes to sexual health, we are also demonstrating what we can achieve when we see partnerships between specialists, GPs, nurses, community, researchers, health promoters and educators."

The media pack included with this release contains more information, quotes and interview opportunities with experts working in the following areas:

- Highlights from New Zealand's first comprehensive sexual health survey
- How to counter the arguments of anti-vaxxers
- Challenges facing migrant sex workers in New Zealand
- Trends in STI and HIV diagnoses in Australia, with a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations
- The implications of kissing as a transmission risk for gonorrhoea
- Equity of access to PrEP in Australia, particularly among newly-arrived overseas/Asian-born men who have sex with men
- Trends in STI and HIV diagnoses in Asia and the Pacific, which has some of the highest rates of curable STIs in the world

More information:

- See the full conference program: <https://ashm.eventsair.com/QuickEventWebsitePortal/iusti-asia-pacific-sexual-health-congress/program/Agenda>
- Join the conversation on the conference hashtag via Twitter [@ASHMMedia](#) and [#IUSTIAP18](#)

For all media enquires, please contact Benjamin Riley at ASHM Media on +61 403 184 339 or media@ashm.org.au

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#IUSTIAP18 HOT TOPICS: New Zealand's first comprehensive sexual health survey

Key messages:

- The results from New Zealand's first comprehensive sexual health survey reinforce the need for greater condom use according to the Ministry of Health.
- The first results from the survey, conducted three years ago as part of the Health Survey, show that by 17, half of all New Zealanders have had sex — in line with similar survey results from the UK.
- The survey also found 11% of women and 3% of men reported an incident of sex against their will during their lifetime — information useful for those providing sexual health services and sex education.
- The survey provides a valuable store of information that is planned to be available later next year to researchers and the sector wanting to analyse the information in more detail.

Available for media interviews:

- **Niki Stefanogiannis — Spokesperson on behalf of Bridget Murphy, Senior Advisor, Ministry of Health**

Relevant sessions in the #IUSTIAP18 program:

- First heterosexual sex and sexual activity in the last year in a large national survey of New Zealand adults: <https://ashm.eventsair.com/QuickEventWebsitePortal/iusti-asia-pacific-sexual-health-congress/program/Agenda/AgendaItemDetail?id=20c53c45-7955-47c6-962d-37052c8640d7>

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#IUSTIAP18 HOT TOPICS: How to counter anti-vaxxers

Key messages:

- The safety of the HPV vaccine has been extensively assessed since it became available. There is a mind-boggling amount of quality safety data. After over 270 million doses the clear consensus is that this is one of the safest vaccines ever developed.
- The opposition to HPV vaccines brought weapons of mass destruction. Powerful anecdotes of death and disability that scared people away from vaccinating. The anti-vaccine lobby was globally coordinated and well-funded. The horrible truth is that on social media lies spread faster and further than truths.
- Parents all share a desire to keep their children healthy but can differ in how they evaluate information about evidence due to a whole range of cognitive biases — mistakes in reasoning such as taking mental shortcuts or wishful thinking.
- Most people appreciate having the scientific consensus reinforced. However, for others it is not helpful to just give more and more information and expect them to change their mind, in fact it can back fire. Research suggests that conspiratorial thinking, reactance (don't tell me what to do), disgust (such as fear of needles or chemicals), and individualistic world views are at the root of anti-vaccination attitudes, and understanding this better along with establishing and maintaining trust and transparency could help us better communicate the science.

Available for media interviews:

- Dr Helen Petousis-Harris — Vaccinologist, University of Auckland

Relevant sessions in the #IUSTIAP18 program:

- Countering Anti-Vaxxers: <https://ashm.eventsair.com/QuickEventWebsitePortal/iusti-asia-pacific-sexual-health-congress/program/Agenda/AgendaItemDetail?id=02cde76f-f9d2-4a09-9eaf-bf41ee6ecb18>

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#IUSTIAP18 HOT TOPICS: Challenges facing migrant sex workers in New Zealand

Key messages:

- For the most part, the decriminalisation of sex work in New Zealand has delivered. The majority of sex workers in New Zealand are able to work in a compatible way with laws surrounding sex work as they are citizens or permanent residents. They are able, if they wish, to report exploitation, the withholding of money, or violence to relevant authorities.
- However, there is a small population of migrant sex workers, here as either tourists or students, or on other temporary visas, who are working in breach of the law, which means they may be deported if they are reported to Immigration.
- New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective (NZPC) has come across migrant sex workers whose circumstances vary. Some are not affected negatively by their illegality in a direct way. However, others are exposed to conditions where they have been exploited, had money withheld, have been assaulted, and are isolated from support. A few migrant sex workers have reported they will not seek help for anything, whether it is related to their sex work or not. In addition, a number of these migrant sex workers are nervous about accessing health services, including sexual health services.
- NZPC finds itself in a difficult situation as it recognises its responsibilities to work with all sex workers, yet has been publicly criticised and accused of aiding and abetting migrants to breach their visa conditions by providing anonymised sexual and reproductive health services to these sex workers.

Available for media interviews:

- Dame Catherine Healy — National Coordinator, New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective

Relevant sessions in the #IUSTIAP18 program:

- Sex Work — Identifying Current Issues and Gaps and Future Directions:
<https://ashm.eventsair.com/QuickEventWebsitePortal/iusti-asia-pacific-sexual-health-congress/program/Agenda/AgendaItemDetail?id=0cb94dbf-ee00-4deb-a6ec-e1de2bbbd557>

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#IUSTIAP18 HOT TOPICS: Trends in STI and HIV diagnoses in Australia

Quotes from Dr Skye McGregor, Epidemiologist, The Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney:

- “There were 963 new HIV diagnoses in Australia in 2017, the lowest number since 2010. We are attributing the promising results to more people getting tested for HIV, more people living with HIV starting treatment which reduces the risk of HIV transmission to effectively zero, and an increased use of preexposure prophylaxis (or PrEP, an HIV prevention pill).”
- “This decline in HIV is good news, but there is much more work to be done. PrEP offers every opportunity to drive down HIV to low levels, but it needs to reach all people who could benefit from it. In particular we need to improve access for gay and bisexual men living outside of inner-city areas, gay and bisexual men born overseas and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander gay and bisexual men.”
- “According to the 2017 surveillance data, a quarter of new HIV diagnoses in Australia were among heterosexuals, with a 10% increase in diagnoses over the past five years. Almost half the diagnoses in this population are late, which means that the person has been living with HIV for four or more years without knowing. These data highlight the importance of HIV testing among heterosexuals.”
- “Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, HIV diagnoses have been increasing over the past five years, with rates almost two times higher than the Australian-born non-Indigenous population in 2017. The fact that Aboriginal populations are not seeing the same declines as the non-Indigenous population means the gap is likely to widen, unless we increase our efforts in HIV prevention, in particular, targeted campaigns for the community focused on testing, treatment and PrEP.”

Quotes from Professor Rebecca Guy, Professor and Program Head, The Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney:

- “Up until recently, gonorrhoea has been uncommon in young heterosexual people living in major cities in Australia. Rising rates in this group highlight the need for initiatives to raise awareness among clinicians and young people about the importance of testing.”
- “Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, chlamydia and gonorrhoea rates were three and seven times higher than in the non-Indigenous population and the gaps were greater in regional and remote areas. Culturally appropriate health promotion campaigns, and comprehensive strategies are needed to reduce other STIs in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.”
- “Since 2011, there has been a resurgence of infectious syphilis among young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in regional and remote areas of Northern Australia. Initiatives underway to address the syphilis resurgence include enhanced testing and treatment.”

Available for media interviews:

- Dr Skye McGregor — Epidemiologist, The Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney
- Professor Rebecca Guy — Professor and Program Head, The Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney

Relevant sessions in the #IUSTIAP18 program:

- Trends in HIV diagnoses in Australia / Trends in STI diagnoses in Australia:
<https://ashm.eventsair.com/QuickEventWebsitePortal/iusti-asia-pacific-sexual-health-congress/program/Agenda/AgendaItemDetail?id=351feaca-7014-4400-afe5-5bb9aeb9c706>

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#IUSTIAP18 HOT TOPICS: Kissing as a transmission risk for gonorrhoea

Key messages:

- Kissing is much more common than previously appreciated among gay and bisexual men who have sex with men. Melbourne Sexual Health Centre surveyed 3,677 men and found that they have about 4 kissing-only partners and 5 kissing-with-sex partners but only have 1 sex-only partners in the last 3 months.
- Although there were a few case reports more than 30–40 years ago suggesting gonorrhoea can be transmitted from kissing, until now, kissing has always been considered a 'low or negligible risk' activity and therefore neglected in research. It is surprising that there has been no study investigating the number of kissing partners in gonorrhoea transmission.
- Together with the team at the Melbourne Sexual Health Centre, we conducted the first and largest epidemiological research to validate that kissing is a significant risk factor for oropharyngeal gonorrhoea in MSM, irrespective of whether sex also occurs. These data support the hypothesis that kissing may play a major role in the transmission of oropharyngeal gonorrhoea amongst MSM.
- A novel intervention that targets oropharyngeal gonorrhoea is required. The team at the Melbourne Sexual Health Centre has been exploring whether daily use of mouthwash could prevent oropharyngeal gonorrhoea from the OMEGA (Oral Mouthwash to Eradicate GonorrhoeA) study. Results from the OMEGA study will be available in 2019.

Available for media interviews:

- Dr Eric Chow — Senior Research Fellow, Melbourne Sexual Health Centre

Relevant sessions in the #IUSTIAP18 program:

- Kissing is an Important Risk Factor for Oropharyngeal Gonorrhoea in Men Who Have Sex with Men:
<https://ashm.eventsair.com/QuickEventWebsitePortal/iusti-asia-pacific-sexual-health-congress/program/Agenda/AgendaItemDetail?id=2d8ba2b8-a4b2-4d59-b826-aca2dcfce3a1>

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#IUSTIAP18 HOT TOPICS: Equity of access to PrEP in Australia

Key messages:

- Newly-arrived overseas/Asian born men who have sex with men are now more than four times likely to be infected with HIV in Australia.
- This is because PrEP and HIV treatment-as-prevention have successfully suppressed HIV infection only in those that can access Medicare services.
- Newly-arrived overseas/Asian born men cannot easily access HIV testing, PrEP or treatment because they have complicated private health insurance policies which are not optimised to provide access to this type of health coverage.
- This health risk endangers Australia's reputation as a safe destination for Australia's \$20 billion per year overseas education industry.
- PrEP and HIV treatment-as-prevention is a major investment in public health and will be less effective when part of the community is not covered by it.
- To adequately control HIV in the entire population, Australia should extend the interventions known to prevent HIV infection to the entire population.

Available for media interviews:

- **Dr Nick Medland — Sexual Health Physician, Melbourne Sexual Health Centre and Senior Researcher, The Kirby Institute, Melbourne**

Relevant sessions in the #IUSTIAP18 program:

- PrEP — If You Want Good Control You Need Equity of Access:
<https://ashm.eventsair.com/QuickEventWebsitePortal/iusti-asia-pacific-sexual-health-congress/program/Agenda/AgendaItemDetail?id=736dff5b-326b-4123-8a2b-b76cad70f4dd>

Additional abstracts in the #IUSTIAP18 program relating to PrEP access in New Zealand:

- High STI Incidence Among NZPrEP Study Participants — Implications For Real World Delivery:
<https://az659834.vo.msecnd.net/eventsairaueprod/production-ashm-public/52630a69a6084bc6b8b7389ac0d7b911>
- NZPrEP: An HIV Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis Demonstration — Project With Equity Quotas In Auckland, New Zealand: <https://az659834.vo.msecnd.net/eventsairaueprod/production-ashm-public/b600d9bc3203472994d9f0e7e3896661>

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#IUSTIAP18 HOT TOPICS: Trends in STI and HIV diagnoses in Asia and the Pacific

Key messages:

STIs

- The global burden of 4 curable STIs (syphilis, chlamydia, gonorrhea, and trichomoniasis) in 2016 remains very high and is largely unchanged from 2012 with more than 1 million infections occurring globally each day.
- Of the six WHO regions, the Western Pacific Region (WPR) continues to carry the highest burden of these 4 curable STIs. There were no significant declines in these 4 infections in the WPR comparing 2012 to 2016 estimates.
- Updated global estimates suggest the need for expanded access and uptake of testing and treatment services for sexually active adults.
- There are very few prevalence studies from men and thus the burden of STIs among men is largely unknown. Improved surveillance to specifically assess national-level burden of disease could expand advocacy efforts to improve service delivery.

HIV

- Decline in new HIV infections has stalled in Asia Pacific. With the current pace, Asia and the Pacific will fall short of the 2020 Fast-Track target (90,000 new infections) by 170,000.
- 84% of new HIV infections in Asia and the Pacific are concentrated among key populations and their sexual partners.
- A significant increase in new HIV infections is ongoing in some of the Asia Pacific countries.

Available for media interviews:

- **Dr Naoko Ishikawa — Coordinator, HIV, Hepatitis, and Sexually Transmitted Infections Unit, Division of Communicable Diseases, the WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific**

Relevant sessions in the #IUSTIAP18 program:

- Trends in HIV diagnoses in Asia and the Pacific / Trends in STI diagnoses in Asia and the Pacific:
<https://ashm.eventsair.com/QuickEventWebsitePortal/iusti-asia-pacific-sexual-health-congress/program/Agenda/AgendaItemDetail?id=351feaca-7014-4400-afe5-5bb9aeb9c706>

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#IUSTIAP18 HOT TOPICS: Genomics — Using cutting-edge technology to understand STI transmission

Key messages:

- We have seen the discovery of a highly drug-resistant strain of shigella persistent in men who have sex with men (MSM) that is resistant to almost all oral antibiotics. Shigella is a highly contagious intestinal bacteria that causes dysentery.
- Shigellosis is usually a food borne infection that occur mainly in returning travellers, but is increasingly a sexually transmitted infection in MSM.
- Improved surveillance is needed, and clinicians need to be aware that it is an STI so they can promote safe sexual practices and more awareness around the empirical use of antibiotics for men who have sex with men who present with STI symptoms.
- Strains of resistant gonorrhea associated with MSM sexual networks have also been found. PrEP seems to be playing a role in the transmission of bacterial STIs.
- We are using genomics, a cutting-edge technology that we can use to better inform public health interventions and educational messages around STIs.

Available for media interviews:

- **Dr Deborah Williamson — Deputy Director, Microbiological Diagnostic Unit Public Health Laboratory, Doherty Institute, Melbourne**

Relevant sessions in the #IUSTIAP18 program:

- Gollow Lecture — Dissecting STI Transmission using Genomics:
<https://ashm.eventsair.com/QuickEventWebsitePortal/iusti-asia-pacific-sexual-health-congress/program/Agenda/AgendaItemDetail?id=688108fa-14a7-4115-9089-f1e2fb9ce1a0>
- Using genomics to understand STI transmission across population groups:
<https://ashm.eventsair.com/QuickEventWebsitePortal/iusti-asia-pacific-sexual-health-congress/program/Agenda/AgendaItemDetail?id=2377c917-e44a-4ce1-897d-30e3d612e844>

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