

Amanda Cohn – University of New South Wales

“My vagina makes funny noises”: Analysing online forums to assess the real sexual health concerns of young people

Cohn A¹, Richters J¹

1. University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW

Background and aim: Most developed countries provide sexual health information to young people, usually targeting the prevention of sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancy. Consulting with communities and identifying their needs is a crucial early step in culturally appropriate health promotion. Youth is a distinct cultural group; for sexual health promotion messages to be effective, we need to assess the behavior, understanding, and needs of young people, which are often assumed rather than investigated (1). The internet is young people’s primary source of health information (2), and an efficient and cost-effective source of large amounts of data. Forum web pages (where users anonymously post a question to be answered by the general public) are increasingly popular and commonly appear in search results for sexual health queries. We aimed to assess the sexual health concerns of young people by analysing forum web pages.

Method: One hundred online sexual health forum pages were collected from five popular websites and indexed using NVivo software, noting demographics, primary complaint, type of question and response, misconceptions of medical concepts, and general keywords.

Results and conclusions: Gaps in knowledge were identified regarding tampon use, menstrual fluid, hormonal contraception, sexually transmitted infections, and signs of pregnancy. Forum participants searched using symptoms, suggesting health promotion websites for young people should be organized by symptom. Sex education should inform students about transmission risks associated with common sexual practices rather than focusing on diseases and should teach how to find and access local services.

References

1. Allen L, 2005, Sex Education, 5(4):389-404.
2. Gray NJ et al, 2005, Soc Sci Med, 60:1467–78.