

Strike puts sexual health at risk

Experts fear more infections, unwanted pregnancies with public health nurses on strike and clinics shut

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Toronto will see a spike in sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies with public health nurses on strike, sexual health experts say.

City-run sexual health clinics, which provide free or low-cost birth control, testing for sexually transmitted infections (STI) and free treatment and emergency contraceptive pills, are closed. Many clinics that partner with Toronto Public Health are running at reduced capacity.

"If these services continue not to be offered, the transmission rates will be higher," said LaRon E. Nelson, an assistant professor at the University of Toronto's Bloomberg Faculty of Nursing. "Sexual health clinics reduce the amount of disease in the community and we are less able to do that now."

Public health staff are also concerned about important services affected by the strike, and plan to hold a news conference tomorrow at Metro Hall.

Nelson and other experts say the city's most vulnerable – teens, the poor and new immigrants – are falling through the cracks despite Toronto Public Health contingency plans. Many people who seek services at sexual health clinics are one-time clients who want anonymity, youth who are reluctant to see a family doctor and those who do not have OHIP cards.

The timing of the strike may also lead to a rise in unwanted pregnancies and STI, including syphilis, chlamydia and gonorrhoea.

Nelson said studies show sexual activity and infection rates peak in summer months.

The city's five full-time sexual health clinics see about 1,500 people every month, said Toronto Public Health spokeswoman Anne Marie Aikins.

Toronto Public Health is diverting calls made to closed clinics to its AIDS & Sexual Health InfoLine, where non-union staff provide counselling over the phone, call in prescriptions for birth control to pharmacies and refer people to partner community health centres.

Non-unionized staff are also following up with those who test positive for STI and providing an appropriate treatment plan.

However, staff are not notifying a patient's partners, a service normally provided.

Dr. Arlene King, Ontario's chief medical officer of health, yesterday said the city's limited public health programs do not pose an immediate threat.

Hassle Free Clinic, a busy downtown sexual health clinic, has become even busier since the strike, said Jane Greer, an administrator and counsellor.

"We are seeing people who can't get into other clinics, but I'm more concerned about who is being missed," she said, noting she has heard from clients who have travelled from Scarborough that others in the community cannot find the time or afford the trip downtown. No sexual health clinics are open in Scarborough.

"Even if five per cent of people with an untreated STI are not treated or cared for, the outcome is enormous," she said.

Shirley Watson, head nurse at the Flemingdon Health Centre, which partners with Toronto Public Health, said she has been handing out more low-cost birth control at the centre's two-evening-a-week sexual health clinic since other area clinics closed.

Still, she said, not everyone who needs birth control is getting it.

With files from Donovan Vincent and Theresa Boyle