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Eurosurveillance, Volume 8, Issue 25, 17 June 2004

Articles

Citation style for this article: Von Holstein I, Fenton KA, Ison C. European network for surveillance of STIs (ESSTI) establishes working groups on lymphogranuloma venereum and HIV/STI prevention among MSM. *Euro Surveill.* 2004;8(25):pii=2490. Available online: <http://www.eurosurveillance.org/ViewArticle.aspx?ArticleId=2490>

European network for surveillance of STIs (ESSTI) establishes working groups on lymphogranuloma venereum and HIV/STI prevention among MSM

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The European Surveillance of Sexually Transmitted Infections (ESSTI) [1] network, at its third collaborative group meeting on 27-28 May 2004, established two working groups to facilitate information exchange on lymphogranuloma venereum (LGV), following the emergence of outbreaks in men who have sex with men (MSM) in cities in western Europe; and to appraise options for strengthening HIV/STI prevention activities in MSM in the European Union (EU).

Three outbreaks of LGV in MSM in Rotterdam, Antwerp and Paris have been detected recently [2]. ESSTI's early warning and alert system, ESSTI ALERT, which has been operational since April 2003, was instrumental in increasing awareness of these and prompted the investigation of the outbreak in France. The outbreaks may be linked and investigations are ongoing. Discussions included an information exchange on microbiological confirmation of LGV cases (by genotyping) and the need for coordinating the investigation and reporting of these outbreaks across EU states. More generally however, recent increases in HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in MSM in many western and central European states raise wider cause for concern. Apart from LGV, outbreaks of syphilis, antimicrobial resistant gonorrhoea and hepatitis B among MSM have also been recently reported through ESSTI ALERT and in the published literature. Although changes in high risk sexual behaviour among this group may be a driving factor, other social, demographic and behavioural factors may be contributing to the rising disease incidence. A second working group was therefore established, under the leadership of Hans Blystad (Norway), to consider current EU HIV/STI prevention activities among MSM, and to identify ways of strengthening the EU's response to these emerging threats.

Since its inception in December 2001, ESSTI has carried out a comprehensive review of EU STI surveillance systems (submitted to the journal *Sexually Transmitted Infections*) and a retrospective analysis of EU STI surveillance trends from 1990-2000 has also been completed [3]. The network has also completed a survey of laboratory methods for diagnosis of gonorrhoea, chlamydia and syphilis infections in different countries of the EU. A panel exchange for *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* isolates among 14 laboratories across Europe for quality assurance of antimicrobial susceptibility testing has also been completed. A website for the ESSTI network is in preparation, with the launch anticipated for July 2004. Plans for the future (if further funding is secured) include extending the quality assurance programme for *N. gonorrhoeae* isolates to the new states in the EU, instituting an annual quality assurance programme, and completing a survey of surveillance programmes in the new EU states.

The ESSTI network has confirmed the added value of collaboration at the European level in STI surveillance. Over the past three years, network participants have gained an improved understanding of STI epidemiological and laboratory surveillance methods in the EU; developed innovative initiatives to diagnose and monitor infection; and raised the profile of European surveillance and laboratory diagnostic initiatives both within Europe and internationally.

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