Reviewer's report

Title: Syphilis screening in the antenatal care: a cross-sectional study from Botswana

Version: 1 Date: 18 April 2006

Reviewer: David Mabey

Reviewer's report:

General
This paper describes a cross sectional survey of syphilis prevalence among attenders at antenatal clinics at 13 primary health care clinics in Gaborone, Botswana. 703 women were enrolled in the study, of whom 546 were repeat attenders. A high prevalence was found. This is of considerable public health importance, given the serious adverse effects of untreated syphilis on the foetus.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)
A sample of attenders was selected from each clinic proportionate to the total number of attenders. The authors should explain HOW the sample was selected. Was this a random sample, or were consecutive women enrolled? We are told that the only exclusion criterion was the use of antibiotics in the two weeks prior to the visit. How many were excluded for this reason?

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
Methods: when they say a non-specific syphilis test, do they mean non-treponemal?

Results, paragraph 2: 32 out of 74 is not 5%

Discussion, para 1: The authors cite syphilis prevalence from a review of lab books as being 12% in 1992, and 4% in 2003. How was syphilis defined here? TPHA positive (ie syphilis ever), or TPHA and RPR positive, or RPR positive?

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
It is said to be national policy in Botswana to retest all pregnant women at 34-36 weeks gestation. The authors state that three women who initially tested negative had high titre syphilis when tested for the study. It would be helpful if they could calculate the incidence of syphilis during pregnancy, which should be possible from their data, which could provide a justification for this retesting policy. Other important questions include:

• What proportion of women fail to return for their tests results? If many fail to return, testing at the point of care should be considered.
• What proportion of women complete the course of treatment prescribed?

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests
Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I have no competing interests