Treating Sex Workers for STIs Lowers HIV in Pregnant Women

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Treating sexually transmitted infections among female sex workers in India reduces HIV and syphilis rates in pregnant women in the general population, while HIV and STI prevention programs lowered rates of syphilis and other STIs. Publishing their findings in the journal BMJ Open, researchers from the University of Toronto studied the impact of 868 peer-based prevention projects implemented between 1995 and 2008 that reached about half a million sex workers.

In India, HIV is commonly spread from female sex workers to men, who infect their wives in turn. The investigators found that increased funding for prevention programs, outreach, STI treatment and condom distribution were instrumental in lowering syphilis infection rates by 70 percent between 2003 and 2008 among young pregnant women tested at government prenatal clinics. HIV incidence rates in this group fell by 40 percent during the same time period, which the researchers attributed to STI treatments among the sex workers.

The study found that treating an additional one out of 1,000 people for STIs reduced the annual risk of HIV infection by 2 percent and the risk of syphilis infection by 11 percent.

“This vital study is a reminder that governments must invest in prevention, and that even modest amounts of funding that reach the most at-risk groups can yield big reductions in HIV and other infections,” Peter Piot, MD, PhD, director of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and former director of UNAIDS, who was not involved in the study, said in a release.

To read the study abstract, click here.

To read a release on the study, click here.

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