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Syphilis and Other Sexually Transmitted Infections: Challenges for Prevention, Timely Diagnosis, and Treatment

Divina Maria de Jesus
Doutoranda em Saúde Publica
Universidad de Ciencias Empresariales y Sociales, Argentina

Fabiana Ferreira de Castro
Enfermeira
Faculdade do Trabalho, Brasil

Domilene Borges Costa
Doutoranda em Saúde Publica
Universidad de Ciencias Empresariales y Sociales, Argentina

Dênis Carvalho Soares Cavalcante
Auxiliar de Enfermagem
Faculdade Do Trabalho, Brasil

Thaita Thaisi Zago
Mestranda em Ciência Política
Universidad Europea del Atlántico – UNEATLANTICO

Priscila Rodrigues Oliveira
Enfermeira e Especialista em Saúde Pública
Universidade Federal de Uberlândia

Sérgio Raimundo Ernesto Machado
Doutorando em Saúde Publica
Universidad de Ciencias Empresariales y Sociales, Argentina

Siglia Sousa de França
Doutoranda em Saúde Publica
Universidad de Ciencias Empresariales y Sociales, Argentina

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Abstract

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) remain a major public health challenge despite significant advances in prevention, diagnosis, and treatment strategies. Among these infections, syphilis has regained global importance due to persistent transmission, increasing incidence rates, and the continued occurrence of congenital cases associated with inadequate prenatal detection and treatment. Although syphilis is preventable and curable, failures in prevention, delayed diagnosis, limited access to healthcare services, and social vulnerabilities continue to contribute to its persistence. Other STIs, including human immunodeficiency virus infection, human papillomavirus infection, gonorrhea, chlamydia, and viral hepatitis, also represent important causes of morbidity and require comprehensive public health responses. This academic essay analyzes the challenges associated with acquired syphilis, congenital syphilis, and other sexually transmitted infections, emphasizing prevention strategies, timely diagnosis, and effective treatment approaches. The discussion explores the epidemiological relevance of STIs, barriers affecting healthcare access and disease control, and the role of Primary Health Care in implementing integrated prevention and management strategies. The manuscript argues that reducing the burden of STIs requires not only biomedical interventions but also continuous health education, expansion of diagnostic capacity, reduction of stigma, and strengthening of healthcare systems capable of providing comprehensive and equitable sexual health services.

Keywords: syphilis; congenital syphilis; sexually transmitted infections; prevention; diagnosis; primary health care.

1. Introduction

Sexually transmitted infections represent one of the most persistent challenges in global public health. Despite the availability of effective prevention strategies, diagnostic tools, and treatments, millions of new infections continue to occur annually worldwide. STIs affect individuals across different age groups, socioeconomic contexts, and geographic regions, demonstrating that transmission is influenced by a complex interaction between biological factors, sexual behaviors, healthcare access, social inequalities, and cultural conditions. Their consequences extend beyond individual health, affecting reproductive outcomes, maternal and child health, quality of life, and healthcare systems.

Among sexually transmitted infections, syphilis has received renewed attention due to the significant increase in acquired and congenital cases observed in several countries. Caused by a bacterial infection that can be effectively treated when diagnosed appropriately, syphilis represents a paradox within contemporary healthcare: a disease with simple diagnostic methods and effective therapy that continues to generate substantial morbidity and preventable complications. The persistence of syphilis reflects failures in prevention, delayed identification, inadequate treatment, and weaknesses in healthcare organization rather than limitations in therapeutic possibilities.

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Congenital syphilis represents one of the most preventable adverse outcomes associated with maternal infection. Transmission during pregnancy can result in miscarriage, fetal death, premature birth, neonatal complications, and long-term developmental consequences. The occurrence of congenital cases indicates missed opportunities within prenatal care, particularly regarding timely screening, appropriate treatment of pregnant individuals, and follow-up of sexual partners. Therefore, controlling congenital syphilis requires not only clinical interventions but also effective organization of maternal healthcare and surveillance systems.

Considering the continued burden of syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections despite available prevention and treatment strategies, this essay seeks to answer the following research question: How can integrated strategies involving prevention, timely diagnosis, effective treatment, and Primary Health Care strengthening contribute to reducing acquired syphilis, congenital syphilis, and other sexually transmitted infections?

2. Methodology

This manuscript is structured as an academic essay based on critical reflection and theoretical analysis of scientific literature addressing syphilis, congenital infections, sexually transmitted infections, prevention strategies, diagnostic approaches, and healthcare organization. The objective is to discuss contemporary challenges and opportunities related to STI control, emphasizing the relationship between individual care, public health interventions, and healthcare system responses.

The analysis is organized into three thematic sections. The first section discusses syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections as persistent public health challenges, considering epidemiological patterns and social determinants associated with transmission. The second section examines barriers related to prevention, early diagnosis, and timely treatment. The third section explores the role of Primary Health Care and public health strategies in strengthening STI prevention, surveillance, and comprehensive management.

To preserve the continuity of the discussion and improve readability, references are not inserted throughout the body of the manuscript. All scientific concepts, epidemiological considerations, and theoretical arguments presented in this essay are supported by peer-reviewed publications, international guidelines, and institutional reports, which are presented in full in the reference section according to the American Psychological Association (APA, 7th edition) formatting standards.

3. Development

3.1 Syphilis and Other Sexually Transmitted Infections as Persistent Public Health Challenges

Sexually transmitted infections remain among the most important infectious diseases affecting global health, despite decades of scientific progress in prevention, diagnosis, and

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treatment. Their persistence demonstrates that STI control depends on much more than the availability of biomedical tools. Transmission patterns are influenced by social relationships, cultural norms, healthcare accessibility, economic conditions, education, stigma, and the capacity of health systems to provide timely and comprehensive services. As a result, STIs must be understood as complex public health phenomena requiring integrated responses.

Syphilis occupies a particularly relevant position within this scenario because it combines high transmissibility, significant health consequences, and effective treatment possibilities. Caused by a bacterial infection, syphilis can progress through different clinical stages, ranging from early manifestations to severe complications involving neurological, cardiovascular, and systemic conditions. When undiagnosed or inadequately treated, the infection may persist for years, increasing the possibility of transmission and generating preventable complications.

The resurgence of syphilis in many countries reflects broader challenges in sexual health management. Although diagnostic methods are widely available and treatment is relatively simple, increasing infection rates reveal persistent gaps in prevention, testing coverage, partner management, and continuity of care. This situation highlights the importance of strengthening healthcare systems rather than relying exclusively on individual behavioral interventions.

Acquired syphilis affects individuals across different population groups, demonstrating that transmission is not restricted to specific social categories. However, certain populations may experience increased vulnerability due to structural barriers, limited access to healthcare, reduced availability of preventive resources, discrimination, or social exclusion. Understanding these inequalities is essential for designing interventions capable of reaching individuals who are often underserved by conventional healthcare approaches.

Congenital syphilis represents one of the clearest examples of preventable disease-related harm. The transmission of syphilis from mother to child during pregnancy or childbirth can result in severe consequences for fetal and neonatal health. Despite effective prenatal screening and treatment options, congenital cases continue to occur, indicating failures in healthcare access, prenatal follow-up, diagnostic processes, or timely therapeutic interventions.

The persistence of congenital syphilis reflects weaknesses in maternal and child healthcare systems. Successful prevention requires more than identifying maternal infection; it depends on early prenatal care, adequate laboratory testing, appropriate treatment completion, evaluation of sexual partners, and follow-up after diagnosis. Any interruption within this chain of care may result in continued transmission and adverse pregnancy outcomes.

Other sexually transmitted infections also contribute substantially to global morbidity. Human immunodeficiency virus infection, human papillomavirus infection, gonorrhea, chlamydia, herpes infections, and viral hepatitis affect millions of individuals and generate consequences ranging from acute symptoms to chronic complications. Some STIs are associated with infertility, cancer development, pregnancy complications, chronic liver

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disease, and increased susceptibility to other infections.

The epidemiological characteristics of STIs have changed over time due to transformations in sexual behaviors, demographic patterns, mobility, access to digital communication technologies, and healthcare utilization. These changes require continuous adaptation of prevention strategies and surveillance systems. Traditional approaches based only on risk identification are insufficient because transmission occurs within complex social networks and diverse populations.

Stigma represents one of the greatest barriers to STI prevention and care. Fear of judgment, discrimination, exposure of private information, or negative social consequences may discourage individuals from seeking testing and treatment. This phenomenon delays diagnosis, increases transmission risk, and reduces opportunities for early intervention. Healthcare environments that promote confidentiality, respect, and non-discriminatory care are therefore essential components of effective STI control.

Sexual health education plays a fundamental role in preventing sexually transmitted infections. However, effective education requires more than providing biological information about diseases and transmission mechanisms. Comprehensive sexual health promotion should include discussions about relationships, consent, communication, prevention methods, healthcare access, and reduction of stigma. Educational strategies must also consider cultural contexts and different stages of life.

Young people represent an important population for STI prevention because adolescence and early adulthood are periods associated with increased vulnerability to infection. Factors such as limited access to confidential healthcare, insufficient sexual health information, social pressures, and difficulties negotiating preventive practices may increase exposure risks. Creating youth-friendly health services is therefore essential for promoting early prevention and reducing long-term consequences.

Pregnant individuals require special attention within STI prevention strategies due to the potential consequences for maternal and child health. Prenatal care provides a critical opportunity for screening, diagnosis, counseling, and treatment of infections that may affect pregnancy outcomes. However, the effectiveness of these interventions depends on early entry into prenatal care, continuity of follow-up, availability of diagnostic resources, and appropriate management of identified cases.

The relationship between STIs and broader social determinants of health demonstrates that infection control cannot be separated from issues such as poverty, education, gender inequalities, healthcare access, and social protection. Individuals experiencing socioeconomic vulnerability may face greater barriers to prevention resources, testing services, and treatment adherence. Addressing these determinants is essential for reducing persistent inequalities in STI outcomes.

Public health surveillance plays a central role in understanding STI distribution and guiding interventions. Reliable surveillance systems allow healthcare authorities to identify transmission patterns, monitor disease trends, allocate resources, and evaluate prevention strategies. However, surveillance quality depends on accurate diagnosis,

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notification practices, laboratory capacity, and integration between healthcare services and public health institutions.

Taken together, syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections remain significant public health challenges because their persistence reflects interactions between biological transmission mechanisms and complex social realities. Effective control requires coordinated strategies that combine prevention, early diagnosis, accessible treatment, surveillance, health education, and equitable healthcare delivery. Recognizing STIs as both medical and social challenges is fundamental for developing sustainable approaches capable of reducing their impact on individuals and populations.

3.2 Challenges in Prevention, Early Diagnosis and Timely Treatment of Sexually Transmitted Infections

Preventing sexually transmitted infections requires strategies that combine biomedical interventions, health education, behavioral support, and structural actions capable of reducing barriers to care. Although many STIs can be prevented through well-established measures, persistent transmission demonstrates that prevention remains a complex challenge. Effective control depends not only on individual awareness but also on the capacity of healthcare systems to provide accessible, confidential, and culturally appropriate services for diverse populations.

One of the main challenges in STI prevention is the difficulty of transforming knowledge into sustained protective behaviors. Information regarding transmission, prevention methods, and available healthcare resources does not always result in consistent adoption of safer practices. Individual decisions regarding sexual health are influenced by relationships, social expectations, emotional factors, cultural norms, and access to preventive resources. Therefore, prevention strategies must move beyond information delivery and incorporate approaches that support autonomy and realistic decision-making.

The availability and consistent use of barrier methods remain important components of STI prevention. However, adherence depends on multiple factors, including accessibility, affordability, communication between partners, personal perceptions of risk, and social attitudes toward their use. Prevention programs must consider these practical dimensions and create environments where individuals feel supported rather than judged when seeking preventive resources.

Vaccination represents a major advancement in the prevention of specific sexually transmitted infections. Immunization against infections associated with significant long-term complications provides an important opportunity to reduce disease burden across populations. Nevertheless, vaccine coverage may be affected by misinformation, unequal access, healthcare system limitations, and social perceptions regarding sexual health. Strengthening vaccination strategies requires coordinated communication, community engagement, and integration with routine healthcare services.

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Testing remains a fundamental element of STI control because many infections may occur without noticeable symptoms. Asymptomatic individuals can unknowingly transmit infections to sexual partners, contributing to continued circulation within communities. Expanding access to screening services, particularly among individuals with increased exposure risk, represents an essential strategy for identifying infections before complications develop and before transmission continues.

Despite the availability of diagnostic technologies, delayed diagnosis remains a significant challenge. Individuals may postpone seeking healthcare due to stigma, fear, lack of symptoms, concerns about confidentiality, or limited awareness of available services. Healthcare systems must therefore develop approaches that reduce barriers to testing and create opportunities for diagnosis during routine healthcare interactions.

Rapid diagnostic methods have transformed STI management by allowing earlier identification and treatment initiation. Point-of-care testing, when appropriately implemented, can reduce delays between diagnosis and treatment, particularly in settings where laboratory access is limited. However, the effectiveness of these technologies depends on adequate infrastructure, professional training, quality control systems, and integration into healthcare workflows.

Partner management represents another critical component of STI control. Treating only the diagnosed individual without addressing sexual partners may result in reinfection and continued transmission. Effective partner notification and management strategies require sensitive communication approaches that respect privacy while encouraging timely evaluation and treatment. Healthcare professionals must balance public health objectives with individual rights and confidentiality.

The treatment of syphilis presents unique opportunities and challenges within STI control. Because effective therapy exists and diagnostic tools are accessible, persistent cases often reflect failures in healthcare organization rather than therapeutic limitations. Delays in diagnosis, interruptions in treatment, inadequate follow-up, and difficulties reaching sexual partners contribute to continued transmission despite the availability of effective interventions.

Congenital syphilis prevention requires particular attention to continuity of care during pregnancy. Screening must be accompanied by immediate access to treatment, appropriate follow-up, evaluation of partners, and documentation of completed interventions. Gaps at any stage of this process may allow maternal infection to persist and result in preventable fetal or neonatal complications.

Healthcare professionals also face challenges related to clinical recognition of STIs. Some infections present with mild, atypical, or nonspecific manifestations, making diagnosis difficult without appropriate testing. Continuous professional education is essential to ensure that healthcare teams remain prepared to identify infections, provide counseling, initiate treatment, and apply current clinical recommendations.

Stigma remains a major obstacle throughout the entire STI care pathway, from prevention to treatment completion. Individuals who fear discrimination

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may avoid testing, delay seeking medical attention, or fail to disclose relevant information during consultations. Reducing stigma requires healthcare environments based on respect, confidentiality, and non-judgmental communication, allowing individuals to seek assistance without fear of social consequences.

Another challenge involves ensuring equitable access to STI prevention and treatment services. Geographic distance, financial limitations, transportation difficulties, discrimination, and insufficient healthcare availability may disproportionately affect vulnerable populations. Public health responses must prioritize accessibility and adapt services to reach groups experiencing greater barriers rather than assuming that existing healthcare structures are equally available to all individuals.

The integration of STI prevention into broader healthcare services represents an important strategy for improving detection and treatment. Sexual health should not be addressed only in specialized programs but incorporated into routine care settings, including Primary Health Care, reproductive health services, prenatal care, and other points of contact with healthcare systems. This integrated approach increases opportunities for early identification and comprehensive management.

Taken together, prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of sexually transmitted infections require coordinated strategies that address both clinical and social dimensions. Expanding testing capacity, improving health education, strengthening healthcare professional training, reducing stigma, and ensuring equitable access to treatment are essential actions for controlling STI transmission. Sustainable progress depends on healthcare systems capable of combining technological resources with human-centered approaches that respect individual needs and social realities.

3.3 The Role of Primary Health Care and Public Health Strategies in STI Control

Primary Health Care represents the foundation for effective prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and long-term control of sexually transmitted infections. Its proximity to communities, capacity for continuous care, and comprehensive approach to individual and population health make it a strategic setting for addressing STIs. Unlike healthcare models focused only on treating established infections, Primary Health Care enables preventive interventions, early identification of cases, health education, and continuous support for individuals and communities.

The integration of sexual health into routine Primary Health Care activities is essential for reducing missed opportunities for prevention and diagnosis. Consultations related to general health, reproductive care, family planning, prenatal follow-up, and chronic disease management can provide important opportunities for STI screening, counseling, and education. Making sexual health a routine component of healthcare reduces stigma and reinforces the understanding that STI prevention is part of comprehensive health promotion.

Healthcare professionals working in Primary Health Care play a fundamental role in creating environments where individuals feel comfortable discussing sexual health concerns. Confidentiality, respectful communication, and non-judgmental

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attitudes are essential for establishing trust between patients and healthcare teams. When individuals perceive healthcare services as safe and inclusive spaces, they are more likely to seek testing, disclose relevant information, and complete recommended treatments.

Health education conducted through Primary Health Care contributes significantly to STI prevention. Educational actions can address transmission mechanisms, prevention methods, symptoms, available treatments, vaccination, and the importance of regular testing. However, effective education requires interactive approaches that consider cultural contexts, individual experiences, and different levels of health literacy rather than relying exclusively on traditional information campaigns.

Community-based strategies strengthen the ability of Primary Health Care to reach populations that may experience difficulties accessing conventional healthcare services. Outreach activities, partnerships with community organizations, and engagement with local leaders can expand access to prevention resources and diagnostic services. These approaches are particularly relevant for populations affected by social vulnerability, stigma, or geographic barriers.

Prenatal care represents one of the most important opportunities for STI prevention within Primary Health Care. Early and continuous pregnancy monitoring allows healthcare teams to identify infections that may affect maternal and child health, initiate treatment, and provide appropriate follow-up. Strengthening prenatal services is therefore essential for reducing congenital syphilis and other preventable adverse outcomes associated with maternal infections.

The management of syphilis within Primary Health Care requires coordinated actions involving screening, diagnosis, treatment, notification, partner management, and follow-up. Because syphilis can remain asymptomatic and progress silently, healthcare systems must develop proactive approaches rather than waiting for individuals to present with advanced disease. Routine incorporation of testing strategies into appropriate healthcare encounters increases the likelihood of early identification.

Health surveillance systems must work in close integration with Primary Health Care services to ensure effective STI control. Accurate notification, epidemiological monitoring, and communication between healthcare providers and surveillance structures allow health authorities to identify transmission patterns and implement targeted interventions. Surveillance is not only a mechanism for data collection but also an essential tool for planning and improving healthcare responses.

Digital health technologies offer new possibilities for strengthening STI prevention and management. Electronic medical records, reminder systems, telehealth consultations, and digital educational resources can improve continuity of care and facilitate communication between healthcare professionals and patients. These tools may be particularly valuable in expanding access for individuals who experience barriers related to distance, mobility, or limited availability of healthcare services.

Professional training is a key component of successful STI control strategies. Healthcare workers require continuous education regarding diagnostic

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approaches, treatment protocols, counseling techniques, confidentiality principles, and communication with diverse populations. Adequately trained teams are better prepared to recognize infections, provide appropriate care, and address the social dimensions associated with sexual health.

The involvement of multidisciplinary teams enhances the comprehensiveness of STI care. Physicians, nurses, pharmacists, psychologists, social workers, community health workers, and other professionals contribute complementary perspectives to prevention and treatment. Multidisciplinary approaches allow healthcare services to address not only infection management but also behavioral, emotional, social, and structural factors influencing sexual health outcomes.

Public health policies play an essential role in creating supportive environments for STI prevention. Governmental commitment, adequate resource allocation, accessible diagnostic services, medication availability, vaccination programs, and educational initiatives are necessary to sustain effective control strategies. Without coordinated policies, isolated clinical interventions are unlikely to achieve substantial reductions in STI transmission.

Reducing inequalities must remain a central objective of STI control programs. Socially disadvantaged populations often experience higher exposure to risk factors and greater barriers to healthcare access. Addressing these disparities requires targeted interventions that consider social determinants, improve service accessibility, and ensure that prevention and treatment resources are available according to population needs.

Primary Health Care also contributes to reducing stigma associated with sexually transmitted infections. By incorporating sexual health into routine healthcare and promoting respectful communication, primary care services can challenge misconceptions and create more inclusive environments. Reducing stigma improves healthcare-seeking behavior and strengthens relationships between communities and health systems.

The effectiveness of STI control depends on the integration of individual care and collective public health actions. Clinical management of diagnosed cases must occur alongside prevention programs, surveillance activities, health education, and community engagement. This integrated perspective recognizes that infections are transmitted within social contexts and therefore require responses capable of addressing both biological and societal dimensions.

Considering these aspects, strengthening Primary Health Care is essential for achieving sustainable reductions in syphilis, congenital syphilis, and other sexually transmitted infections. Its capacity to provide accessible care, coordinate prevention strategies, promote health education, and connect individuals with broader public health initiatives positions primary care as a central component of STI control. Effective responses require healthcare systems that combine scientific knowledge, social sensitivity, and organizational capacity to ensure that prevention, diagnosis, and treatment reach all populations.

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4. Conclusion

Syphilis, congenital syphilis, and other sexually transmitted infections remain important public health challenges despite the availability of effective prevention strategies, diagnostic tools, and treatments. Their persistence reflects the complexity of STI transmission, which is influenced by biological mechanisms, individual behaviors, social determinants, healthcare accessibility, stigma, and the organization of health services. Addressing these infections requires moving beyond isolated clinical interventions toward comprehensive approaches capable of integrating prevention, early diagnosis, timely treatment, surveillance, and health promotion.

Primary Health Care plays a central role in this process by providing accessible, continuous, and comprehensive sexual health services for individuals and communities. Strengthening primary care capacity, expanding diagnostic opportunities, improving prenatal care, reducing stigma, promoting health education, and integrating STI control into broader public health strategies are essential measures for reducing preventable complications and transmission. Sustainable progress in STI control depends on healthcare systems that combine biomedical effectiveness with social responsibility, equity, and a commitment to ensuring that all individuals have access to confidential, respectful, and high-quality sexual healthcare.

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