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Hepatitis A outbreak in men who have sex with men, London, August-September 2004

Donal O'Sullivan (donal.osullivan@lambethpct.nhs.uk), South East London Health Protection Unit, London, United Kingdom

An outbreak of hepatitis A in gay men in southeast London has been identified. Nine cases have so far been reported, all with symptom onset dates between mid-August and mid-September 2004 [1]. Five of the affected men reported visiting a gay pub in Southwark, southeast London, in the two months before they became unwell. One of the nine patients is a secondary case, who has a history of household contact with one of the five patients who had visited the pub.

The pub is, in effect, a public sex environment that includes a 'dark room' where sexual activities that carry a high risk of hepatitis A transmission occur. Of the eight patients whose vaccination status is known, none had previously been vaccinated against hepatitis A.

The local health protection unit is working with a number of agencies (including local health authorities and social and health groups that work with gay men) to advise gay men locally of the risk, and how this might be minimised, including advice on immunisation. Increasing community outreach work at this and similar venues, and actions to improve hygiene at the pub are being considered.

Outbreaks of hepatitis A in men who have sex with men (MSM) have been reported from Denmark and the Netherlands in May 2004, and in France in 2000 [2-5]. Studies have established risk factors for acquiring infection.

Following a series of outbreaks of hepatitis A amongst MSM in the United Kingdom including a large outbreak in London in 1997 [5], national recommendations for hepatitis A vaccination were extended to include MSM whose sexual behaviour is likely to put them at risk [6,7]. The provision of hepatitis A vaccination for MSM at genitourinary medicine clinics and outreach services appears to have been successful in controlling the 1997 outbreak. The outbreak reported here may indicate the need to increase hepatitis A vaccination offered to MSM through these services in order to prevent a more wide-scale problem.

The outbreak investigation team is interested in hearing about cases which may be related to this outbreak. Please contact Donal O'Sullivan at donal.osullivan@lambethpct.nhs.uk.

This article has been adapted from reference 1.

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