

# public health priorities for lesbian & bisexual women's sexual health

J Mooney-Somers<sup>1</sup>, R Deacon<sup>2</sup>, J Comfort<sup>3</sup>, J Richters<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Centre for Values, Ethics and the Law in Medicine, University of Sydney; <sup>2</sup> Discipline of Addiction Medicine, University of Sydney; <sup>3</sup> WA Centre for Health Promotion Research, Curtin University; <sup>4</sup> School of Public Health and Community Medicine, University of New South Wales



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SYDNEY



## INTRODUCTION

The 2010 National Women's Health Policy (NWHP) acknowledged for the first time that lesbian and bisexual women may be at risk of poor health outcomes. It called for "information and access to services to sexual health, reproductive health, safe sex practices, screening and maternal health". A lack of systematic, nuanced research on the sexual health of Australian lesbian and bisexual women has resulted in lack of data and difficulty in understanding the needs of and how best to respond to this group.

## AIM

To identify the sexual health needs of lesbian and bisexual women.

## METHODS

A cross-sectional survey of women's health and wellbeing was delivered at lesbian and gay community events in Sydney and Perth in 2012.

## RESULTS

Valid surveys  
Sydney 835      Perth 726

Age range  
Sydney 16–76yr      Perth 16–70yr

Median age  
Sydney 32yr      Perth 28yr

## Sexual identity & attraction

Lesbian  
Sydney 68%      Perth 64%

Bisexual  
Sydney 13%      Perth 21%

Queer or other identifying  
Sydney 13%      Perth 14%

Exclusive attraction to women  
Sydney 29%      Perth 32%

## Relationship status

Regular relationship with woman  
Sydney 49%      Perth 48%

In relationship < 6mo  
Sydney 13%      Perth 21%

Casual sexual partner past 6mo  
Sydney 30%      Perth 31%

Regular relationship + casual partner  
Sydney 21%      Perth 28%

## Sexual behaviour with women

Sex with woman ever  
Sydney 95%      Perth 91%

Sex with woman past 6mo  
Sydney 77%      Perth 71%

Recent sex + multiple sexual partners  
Sydney 30%      Perth 19%

## Sexual behaviour with men

Sex with man ever  
Sydney 63%      Perth 56%

Sex with man past 6mo  
Sydney 15%      Perth 20%

Among women reporting sex with hetero man past 6mo, often unprotected  
Sydney 26%      Perth 35%

Among women reporting sex with gay/bi man past 6mo, often unprotected  
Sydney 11%      Perth 24%

## STI screening

STI test ever  
Sydney 54%      Perth 46%

STI test < 6mo  
Sydney 18%      Perth 13%

STI diagnosis ever  
Sydney 12%      Perth 20%

## Cervical cancer screening

3yr participation rate  
Sydney 72%      Perth 64%

Never screened + sex with man never  
Sydney 25%      Perth 32%

Never screened + sex with man ever  
Sydney 12%      Perth 17%

## THESE FINDINGS RAISE QUESTIONS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

- How can STI prevention programs encompass the knowledge that a majority of lesbian and bisexual women have had sex with a man? And that unprotected sex is common?
- Does this population respond to health promotion designed for assumed heterosexual audiences?
- How can we inform women who have never had sex with a man of the importance of a regular Pap smear? And that sex with a man is not a criterion?
- How can healthcare providers create culturally sensitive environments to encourage open dialogue around sexual practice?