

THE ROLE OF PRIMARY HEALTH CARE IN FACING STI: AN EXPERIENCE REPORT

O PAPEL DA ATENÇÃO PRIMÁRIA À SAÚDE NO ENFRENTAMENTO DE IST: UM RELATO DE EXPERIÊNCIA

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ABSTRACT

Primary health care is the preferred entry point for users of the Brazilian Unified Health System. It allows early diagnosis and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), such as hepatitis B and C, HIV, and syphilis. This experience report described an action aimed at users of a Basic Health Unit (BHU) to improve their adherence to STI care and minimize its associated risks. This study was developed during the practical activities of undergraduate medical students at the Jardim Brasil V BHU in Olinda, Pernambuco (Brazil), in September 2020. The action was previously announced and involved 20 walk-in users; proper pandemic safety precautions were followed. Screening was performed using rapid tests for syphilis, HIV, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C. Participants also received information about STIs and the importance of early investigation; most of them were female, and 15% tested positive for syphilis. None of them had been tested previously. Only 15% of the participants were aware of STI screening tests and acknowledged their importance. Immediate care for individuals with STIs provides a curative strategy, aims to interrupt the chain of transmission, and prevents other STIs and their associated complications.

Keywords: STI; HIV; syphilis; hepatitis; prevention; diagnosis

RESUMO

A Atenção Primária à Saúde é considerada a porta de entrada preferencial do usuário no Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS). A partir dela, é possível garantir o diagnóstico e o tratamento precoces de doenças como as infecções sexualmente transmissíveis (IST), hepatites B e C, HIV e sífilis. Este relato descreve a experiência de uma ação realizada com usuários em uma Unidade Básica de Saúde sobre IST, visando melhorar a adesão da população ao cuidado com IST e minimizar seus riscos. Trata-se de um estudo descritivo do tipo relato de experiência desenvolvido durante as atividades práticas dos estudantes da graduação de medicina na UBS de Jardim Brasil V, em Olinda, Pernambuco, em setembro de 2020. A ação contou com 20 usuários da UBS de demanda espontânea, após sua divulgação prévia, e foram seguidos os cuidados em tempos de pandemia. Foi realizada triagem com testes rápidos para sífilis, HIV, hepatites B e C, e os participantes receberam informações sobre as IST e a importância da investigação precoce. A maioria era do sexo feminino, 15% testaram positivo (sífilis). Nenhum deles havia realizado esses testes antes. Apenas 15% dos voluntários tinham conhecimento dos testes de triagem das IST e compreendiam a importância de sua realização. O atendimento imediato de uma pessoa com IST não é apenas uma estratégia curativa, mas também visa à interrupção da cadeia de transmissão, bem como à prevenção de outras IST e complicações decorrentes delas.

Palavras-chave: IST; HIV; Sífilis; Hepatite; Prevenção; Diagnóstico

INTRODUCTION

Primary health care is the preferred entry point for users of the Brazilian Unified Health System (SUS), playing a crucial role in ensuring access to healthcare services for the population within its coverage area.¹

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are

a public health concern. They are among the most common communicable diseases, affecting the health and lives of people worldwide.² In May 2016, the World Health Assembly adopted the 2016–2021 Global Health Sector Strategy on STI,³ which includes the expansion of evidence-based interventions and services to control these infections and reduce their public health impact by 2030.

SPACE OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

In 2019, the Brazilian Notifiable Diseases Information System reported 152,915 cases of acquired syphilis, an easily detectable systemic disease, with a simple, low-cost, and 100% effective treatment.² The system also recorded 41,909 new cases of HIV infection and 37,308 AIDS cases.⁴ Most HIV infections in Brazil were reported among individuals aged 20 to 34 years (52.7%). Between 1999 and 2019, 673,389 confirmed viral hepatitis cases were reported.⁵

Ideally, 100% of primary health care teams should be trained in counseling and rapid testing (RT) for HIV, syphilis, and hepatitis B and C. The RT was implemented in Brazil in 2011 and plays a crucial role in the fight against STI, as it could facilitate the early diagnosis of people living with these infections¹. Moreover, determining serological status encourages behavioral changes in individuals. Following a positive diagnosis, adherence to treatment must occur to improve quality of life and even lead to a cure in cases of syphilis.^{6,7}

EXPERIENCE REPORT

Students from the Faculdade de Medicina de Olinda conducted observations during their activities at the Jardim Brasil V Basic Health Unit (BHU)

and identified a low demand for RT and STI prevention. These observations were part of the theoretical-practical program “Academy-Service-Community Integration” and the implementation of the Ministry of Health’s 2020 STI Prevention Campaign.⁸ Along with the Family Health Team, the students planned a brief intervention, which was announced 30 days in advance by the community health agents within the community.

On the scheduled day, the students and the Family Health Team welcomed the users and organized the appointments following distancing and anti-crowding guidelines in accordance with the COVID-19 pandemic public health recommendations. Twenty users participated in the action, with mean age of 56.7 years, being 90% females and 10% males. Initially, users were asked about their familiarity with STIs, their awareness of and the importance of RT, and any history of previous STI diagnosis. Then, they were informed about the testing procedures and invited to undergo testing; all users agreed to participate. Following the analysis, three users, including one couple, tested positive for syphilis. Seventeen users tested negative for syphilis, HIV, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C. Only three users were aware of the existence and importance of RT.

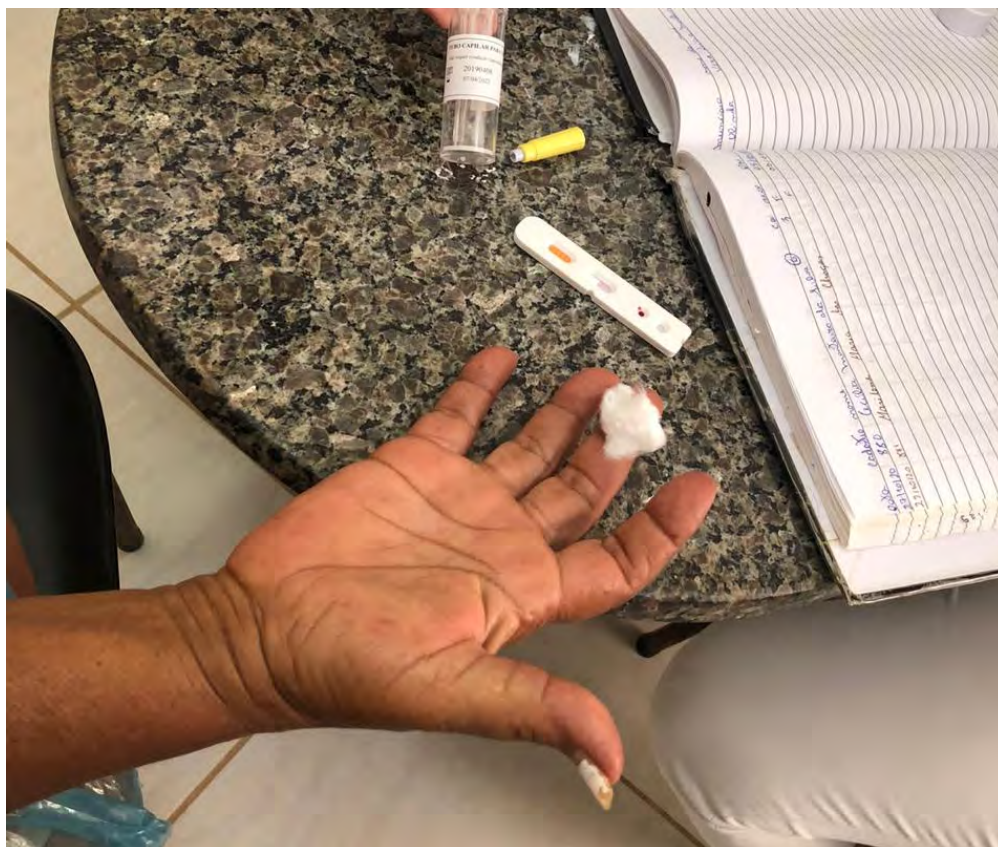


Figure 1. Record of a user performing rapid testing for sexually transmitted infections.

Last, the students warned the users on the importance of screening for STI diagnosis, prevention methods, modes of transmission, diagnostic processes (Figure 2), and the availability of free treatment provided directly at the BHU by the SUS.

COMMENTARIES

Reflections must be performed regarding the distribution of health services, considering the conditions under which users can access care to ensure isonomy for individuals with similar needs.

Naturally, controlling the disease by identifying existing cases and providing treatment should contribute to breaking the transmission chain. This strategy strengthens the importance of understanding how services are organized, aiming to formulate regionally focused policies that consider local realities, respect the historical and cultural aspects of management processes, and promote the equitable development of the SUS.

Last, care, diagnosis, and treatment are provided free of charge in SUS healthcare services.⁹ However, according to the World Health Organization, assessing the effectiveness of diagnosis and treatment requires the development of strategies that ensure the availability of RT supplies, confirm diagnoses, and initiate STI treatment. These strategies improve the quality of life of individuals and interrupt the transmission chain of these infections.

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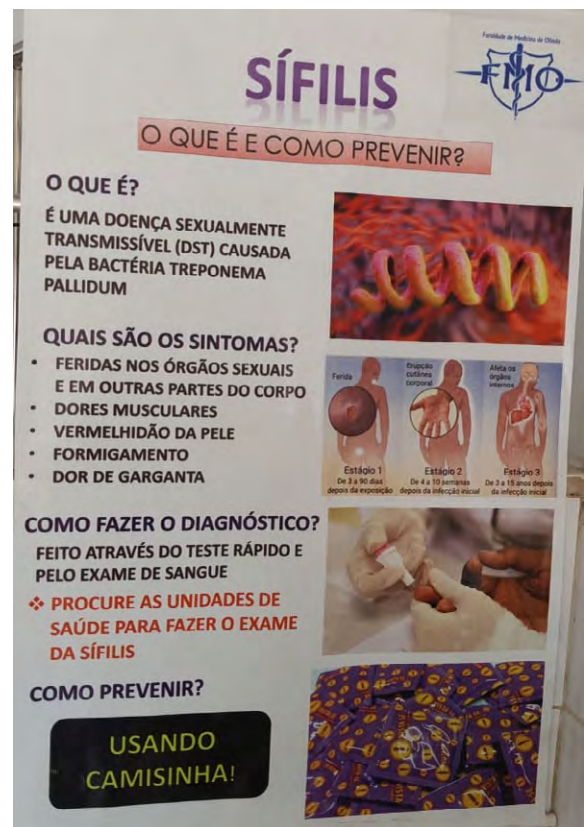


Figure 2. Poster about syphilis presented at the action.