

A survey of the use of prostitutes (commercial sex workers) by new male attenders at a genito urinary medicine clinic

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SUMMARY

This study documents the use of prostitutes (commercial sex workers) by new male patients attending a genito urinary medicine clinic. 541 consecutive male patients completed an anonymous self-administered questionnaire. 48 (8.9%) gave a history of previous purchase of sexual services in Northern Ireland and/or elsewhere; 69% of these encounters occurred outside Northern Ireland. The largest group were single men aged 20-29 years. 87% of those who purchased services in Northern Ireland were asked by the prostitute to use a condom compared with 60% elsewhere, but there was no significant difference in actual condom use between both groups (66.7% vs 72.7%) Only 21% of patients who had purchased the services more than once used condoms consistently and 29% were willing to pay more for unprotected sexual intercourse. 40% attributed their attendance at this clinic directly or indirectly to their encounter with a prostitute. Encounters with prostitutes were often related to alcohol consumption, 88% sometimes or always purchasing these services after drinking alcohol. Despite widespread publicity at-risk behaviour involving unprotected sexual intercourse with prostitutes is not uncommon. Health education should be targeted at the young single male who travels outside Northern Ireland.

INTRODUCTION

Prostitutes (commercial sex workers) are an important source of sexually transmitted disease and the association has been extensively studied in the past.¹⁻³ With the advent of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection, concern about this association has been heightened and during the early spread of HIV infection in North America and Europe, prostitutes were viewed as a reservoir of the virus. Much of the literature on the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection in the commercial sex industry has focused on those who sell services rather than their clients.^{4,6}

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A project by the public health department of the Eastern Health & Social Services Board and the genito urinary medicine department at the Royal Victoria Hospital identified 23 prostitutes working in Belfast, but only nine of these (7 females, 2 males) agreed to answer a questionnaire. This revealed a high level of knowledge as to transmission of HIV infection and a reported 100% use of condoms with all clients by the female prostitutes and of 75-90% use of condoms for anal sex by the males.

The aim of the present project was to document the previous use of prostitutes and the behaviour of new male attenders at the department of genito urinary medicine. Various estimates have been made with regard to use of prostitutes in the general population.⁷⁻⁹ Given the characteristics of patients attending this clinic, a study of this nature cannot give an accurate estimate of the frequency of the use of prostitutes in the general population in Northern Ireland, but it can help us to formulate policies for health education of patients in an effort to control the spread of sexually transmitted disease.

METHODS

Consecutive new male attenders at the genito urinary medicine (GUM) clinic, Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast, from October 1993 to end of December 1993 were asked to complete a self-administered anonymous questionnaire when they registered with the clinic. The questionnaire included age, employment, marital status and sexual orientation. It also asked if they had ever purchased services from prostitutes. Those who answered yes to this question were asked further questions on whether they had purchased services locally in Northern Ireland and/or elsewhere. Particular attention was paid to the source of services purchased (street prostitution, organised brothels, massage parlours), the nature of these services, and the use of condoms by attenders and prostitutes.

RESULTS

We recruited 541 male attenders over the three month period. Social and demographical details are shown in Table 1. Forty-eight (8.9%) admitted to using the services of prostitutes. Five hundred and twenty-eight (97.6%) were heterosexual, 11 (2%) were homosexual/bisexual. All users of prostitutes were from the heterosexual group.

Twenty-eight (58.3%) of the attenders who had purchased these services had regular sexual partners, compared to 329 (67%) of those who had never used the services of a prostitute (NS, $p > 0.25$). Most of the encounters occurred outside Northern Ireland, 33 entirely so and seven intermittently.

Fifteen of the 48 (31%) had purchased services locally in Northern Ireland. Ten involved street prostitution in Belfast, and a further one outside Belfast. Three had purchased services in organised brothels, mainly through advertisements in local adult magazines, two in private houses and one in a massage parlour (some respondents gave more than one response). Ten had purchased the services within the last 12 months. The most common form of services bought were vaginal and oral sex (5), oral sex only (4), masturbation and oral sex (2), and vaginal intercourse only (1); two did not respond to the question. None of the services bought involved anal intercourse or male prostitutes.

TABLE 1

Age, marital status and employment details of the 541 male attenders at the genito urinary medicine clinic during a three month period.

	<i>Has used prostitutes</i>	<i>Has not used prostitutes</i>
<i>Age</i>		
≤ 20	1 (2%)	41 (8%)
20-29	24 (50%)	281 (57%)
30-39	17 (36%)	116 (24%)
40-49	6 (13%)	50 (10%)
> 50	0	4 (1%)
No answer		1
<i>Marital status</i>		
Single	29 (60%)	325 (66%)
Married	9 (19%)	93 (19%)
Co-habiting	5 (10%)	35 (7%)
Separated	4 (18%)	25 (5%)
Divorced	1 (2%)	15 (3%)
<i>Employment</i>		
Full time	35 (74%)	332 (67%)
Part time	2 (4%)	27 (6%)
Short term unemployment	4 (8%)	27 (6%)
Long term unemployment	3 (6%)	56 (11%)
Student	3 (6%)	45 (9%)
Others	1 (2%)	5 (2%)
No Answer	0	1
TOTAL	48	493

Forty respondents purchased services at some time from prostitutes outside Northern Ireland (Table 2). The services most commonly bought were vaginal intercourse (24), oral sex by prostitutes (7) and masturbation (4). No anal intercourse or male prostitutes were involved.

Most of the clients of prostitutes in Northern Ireland (13/15, 87%) were asked to use a condom for the last services they bought. Only one was not asked to use a condom and he did not do so on a second occasion. Of these 15 clients, only 10 actually stated they had used a condom, one did not, but four did not respond to the question. All but one had purchased services more than once, but only three had used condoms consistently, and three had never used one. Eleven had been provided with a condom by the prostitute during their last visit. Four of the respondents stated that they were willing to pay more for unprotected sexual intercourse, one of whom never used condoms in any case.

Only 24 (60%) of the clients of prostitutes outside Northern Ireland were asked to use a condom and they all did so. Nine (22.5%) were not asked to use condoms, three did not use condoms subsequently, and seven did not respond. Compared to services bought in Northern Ireland, the client-initiated safer sex practice is proportionately higher among those purchasing services outside Northern Ireland.

Three respondents always purchased services under the influence of alcohol, two of whom always used condoms. Eight sometimes purchased services when drinking and of these five always used condoms. Only three were always sober when they purchased services from prostitutes, all of whom used condoms. Six of the respondents attributed their visit to the genito urinary medicine clinic to sexual services bought in Northern Ireland.

TABLE 2

Location of purchase of the services of prostitute by forty respondents.

Holland	10
Spain	5
USA	4
Thailand	4
England	4
Republic of Ireland	3
Scotland	2
Saudi Arabia, Kenya, Cyprus, Philippines, Australia, Germany, Brazil, Italy	1 each

DISCUSSION

Little has been published on the use of prostitutes by genito urinary medicine clinic attenders. In one study from the USA 34% of HIV positive men attending a sexually transmitted disease clinic gave a history of sexual contact with a female prostitute within the preceding five years.¹⁰ In our study of over 500 men only 8.9% had ever used the services of a prostitute, and of these only one third had bought the services locally. These findings are in keeping with our impression that there are a small number of sex workers in Belfast. Although

this may be the case, it would appear from this survey that there is a high degree of awareness of safer sex practices among prostitutes in this survey, 87% of clients having been asked to use condoms on their last sexual contact. Although this is not the 100% reported by prostitutes in our previous study, it does confirm a high degree of awareness of HIV and compares favourably with the 60% of clients who were asked to use a condom with prostitutes abroad.

Our finding also compares favourably with a study of prostitutes in Edinburgh, where only 62.6% of female prostitutes consistently asked their clients to practise safer sex.¹¹ Our study showed that about a third of clients (4/15) were willing to pay more for unprotected sexual intercourse, which is consistent with studies in other parts of the United Kingdom.¹²

A cause for concern is that despite widespread publicity involving preventive measures against the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection, a significant number of men are having high-risk contacts with prostitutes abroad, which could be a source of introducing HIV infection into this community.^{13, 14} There is a continuing need for preventive education and for the provision of condoms for sex workers and their clients. The potential for problems associated with sex tourism should be acknowledged, and suitable health care messages promoted via the mass media with particular emphasis on appropriate media for travellers.

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