

Integrating rapid and laboratory STI diagnostics tests into symptomatic management in an adolescent clinic, Zimbabwe

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Introduction

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) pose significant health risks, especially among adolescents and young adults. In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) like Zimbabwe, STI management primarily relies on syndromic approaches, which often miss asymptomatic cases and result in overtreatment. This study aimed to evaluate the added value of integrating rapid and laboratory based STI diagnostics into syndromic management among adolescents in Mbare, Harare.

Methods

We conducted a cross-sectional study at the Adolescent Corner of Mbare Polyclinic, a community characterized by high population density, poverty, and vulnerability. Participants aged 16–19 years, who reported sexual activity within the past 12 months, underwent routine syndromic assessment alongside diagnostic testing using GeneXpert assays for *Chlamydia trachomatis* (CT) and *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* (NG), and the OSOM test for *Trichomonas vaginalis* (TV). Treatment was provided based on syndromic diagnosis, with follow-up conducted for diagnostic test results.

Results

Revealed a high STI prevalence: 20% for CT, 18% for NG, and 9% for TV. Among females, 70% were overtreated and 20% missed treatment; for males, overtreatment was 55%, with 2% missed treatment. These findings highlight the limitations of syndromic management, especially among adolescent females.

Conclusion

While integrating diagnostic testing showed clear clinical benefits, implementation faced logistical challenges including cost, delayed result turnaround, and difficulty ensuring follow-up. Nonetheless, the study supports prioritizing diagnostic testing access for adolescent females, regardless of symptoms, to reduce missed and inappropriate treatments. Incorporating STI diagnostic testing in adolescent clinics can significantly improve treatment accuracy.

Prioritizing access to diagnostic STI testing and ensuring rapid result delivery is essential to guide accurate, timely treatment, reducing overtreatment and missed cases.