
Sexually Transmitted Diseases and Avenues for Education:

Community Perspectives from Monteverde, Costa Rica

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“Solo Dios es fiel.”

“Only God is Faithful.”

Focus Group Participant

Introduction

- **Monteverde area residents identified Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) as a potential health threat in the region**
- **Reasons: Globalization, rapid development and changing social dynamics**
- **Scarcity of STDs and HIV/AIDS research in the area**
- **This pilot study examined perceptions among Costa Rican males and females 18 years or more living in the region**

Goals

- Assess local attitudes, perceptions, beliefs regarding STDs and HIV/AIDS
- Evaluate community knowledge of routes of transmission, symptoms, and prevention of STDs and HIV/AIDS
- Assess awareness of “at risk” groups

Goals (cont.)

- Identify current sources of STDs and HIV/AIDS information and perceptions of their efficacy
- Identify most effective avenues for health information dissemination
- Present findings to community for development of new health strategies and educational programs

Methods

- **Exploratory Pilot Study**
- **Community Participation Approach**
 - Community members identified the problem and requested the study
 - Extensive use of key community informants for contextual data, instrument development, participant recruitment, and focus group facilitation
- **Mixed Methodology**
 - Quantitative instrument for socio-demographic information
 - 4 focus groups divided by gender with male/female facilitators accordingly
 - ❖ Focus groups: 4-8 people 18 years or more who live in the area
 - ❖ Participants recruited through referrals from community members and one-on-one outreach

Methods (cont.)

- **Only perceptions, not individual behaviors, were sought**
- **Audi-taped and written records of group discussions**
- **Qualitative data analysis through identification of common themes and patterns**

Data Collection

■ Contextual Data

- Semi-structured and informal interviews with key informants, community leaders, and local health officials

■ Focus Group Data

- Administered quantitative instrument: age, gender, civil status, educational level, occupation, and *religion* (optional)
- Facilitated group discussion around selected themes

Participant Characteristics

- **Total of 21 focus group participants: 13 women and 8 men**
- **Median age of participants: 30 years old; 38 years for the females and 21 years for the males**
- **Greater number of divorced and single participants (both genders) than married individuals and those with partners**
- **More than half of all respondents had at least one child**
- **9 of the 21 individuals lived in the area for 2 decades or more**
- **Majority had either primary or secondary level educations, six with university educations**
- **17 of 21 participants had some organized religious affiliation, more than half Roman Catholic**

Qualitative Results

- **Four Main Themes Identified**
 - **Knowledge about STDs and HIV/AIDS and Misconceptions**
 - **Use and Effectiveness of Condoms**
 - **Abstinence**
 - **Availability of information and additional suggestions**

Results (cont.)

- **Good overall knowledge about:**
 - ❑ **Sexual transmission, use of drugs and infected needles**
 - ❑ **No cure for AIDS**
 - ❑ **AIDS treatment**
 - ❑ **Some people who have AIDS appear healthy**
 - ❑ **Some people can live many years without showing symptoms**
 - ❑ **Everyone is at risk**

Results (cont.)

■ A Few Misconceptions

- ❑ **There is no difference between HIV and AIDS**
- ❑ **It can be transmitted via cavities and saliva**
- ❑ **Using 2 or 3 condoms (at a time) protects better**
- ❑ **Condoms are not effective for the prevention of HIV/AIDS**
- ❑ **When a pregnant woman has HIV or AIDS, the child (fetus) automatically is going to have it**

Results (cont.)

■ Use and Effectiveness of Condoms

- **Women:** “El condón no es seguro.”
(The condom is not effective)
- **Men:** “Es casi 100% seguro.”
(It’s almost 100% safe)
- **Women:** “Yo creo que ellos no le gustan mucho a usar un condón”
(I believe that men don’t like to use condoms very often)’
- **Men:** “Sí, los jóvenes lo utlizan más para evitar embarazos.”
(Yes, young people use them more to prevent pregnancy)

Results (cont.)

- Good overall knowledge of abstinence
- Cross-gender agreement that it is unattainable

Results (cont.)

- **Obstacles to HIV Prevention for Women**
 - Difficulty negotiating condom use with partners
 - Difficult to speak with their children about HIV/AIDS
- **Obstacles for both Women and Men**
 - Condoms used mainly for family planning
 - More difficult to use condoms if using other forms of birth control

Results (cont.)

Women: “Una puede ser fiel como una mujer pero un hombre no, el hombre siempre es infiel.”

(A woman is able to faithful, but a man no, a man is never faithful.)

Men: “Sí [abstinencia evita VIH/SIDA], pero es la más difícil de cumplir.”

(Yes (abstinence prevents HIV/AIDS), but it’s the most difficult to do)

“Solo dios es fiel.”

(Only God is faithful.)

Results (cont.)

- **Availability of Information / Additional Suggestions**
 - **Clinic Identified as Main Source of Information**
 - **Women:** Information should be available in the clinic and that men also would receive it there, because they have to go when they are sick.
 - **Men:** “En la clínica, pero los charlas tienen que ser informales y divertidas, para que la gente no se aburra.” (In the clinic, but the chats need to be informal and fun, so that people are not bored)

Results (cont.)

□ Additional Themes

➤ Tourism Identified as a Contributor

➤ Machismo Identified as Contributing Factor

- **Women:** “Hay mucho machismo...está no se me pega.” (There is a lot of machismo...men think it [unprotected sex with other women] won't infect them)

Routes and Types of Education: Suggestions from the Community

- **Most Effective Avenues for Information**
 - **For Women**
 - **Charlas: at home, the clinic, and in the schools for the whole family**
 - **For Men**
 - **Bars, tourist locations, video charlas, Canopy Tour radio station, and churches**
 - **For Young People**
 - **Charlas in the schools (escuela and colegio), and their parents**

Suggestions from the Community

■ More about Charlas

- **Men:** “En la clínica, pero los charlas tienen que ser informales y divertido, para que la gente no se aburra.”

(In the clinic, but the chats need to be informal and fun, so that people are not bored)

Recommendations & Future Research

- **Replicate this pilot study with young people**
- **Help local professionals develop informal chats (charlas) targeting young people and adults**
- **Follow-up studies to assess the effectiveness of newly implemented educational programs**
- **Investigate potential for dispensing free condoms**
- **Study impact of tourism on spread of STDs & HIV/AIDS**

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