Many Young Women Uncomfortable About STD Testing

BY MELINDA TANZOLA

ATLANTA — Many young women are uncomfortable talking to their health care providers about their sexual health and lack accurate information about the STD testing process, based on the results of a survey on STD testing beliefs.

In the study presented at a conference on STD prevention sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Dr. Heather R. Royer of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, recruited 302 women aged 18-24 years: 201 women from four women’s health clinics and 101 women from a university class. Participants were an average of 20 years old; 78% were white, 13% were nonwhite, and 5% were multiple races; this information was missing for the remaining 18%.

The vast majority of respondents (84%) said that they would rather not go to their family doctor for STD testing; 79% said that it is easier to talk with an STD testing specialist than with a family doctor. Moreover, 88% said that it is easier to talk with an STD health care provider than a male.

Nearly a quarter of participants said that they feel embarrassed about talking with a health care provider about STD testing (23%) and about discussing a positive test with a health care provider about STD testing is difficult (22%).

Dr. Royer found significant associations between never having been tested for STDs and reporting embarrassment about sexual health communication. Women who had never been tested were more than twice as likely as those who had been tested to respond that they feel embarrassed about discussing a positive test for STD testing (odds ratio, 2.37); that talking about STD testing is difficult (OR, 2.48); or that filling out forms about their sexual past is embarrassing (OR, 2.06). Women who also lacked knowledge about the STD testing process: 41% assumed that STD testing includes screening for all STDs.

In an interview, Dr. Royer explained that many women thought that if the health care provider performs a Pap smear, they are being tested for STDs, including HPV (41%), gonorrhea (23%), chlamydia (26%), Trichomonas species (17%), syphilis (15%), herpes (14%), HIV/AIDS (2%), and “all STDs” (6%).

“If women think they are automatically being tested for STDs during their annual Pap smear… they would have no reason to ask to be tested.”

Disclosures: None was reported.