

TALK2THEM: Focus group testing an online STI/HIV partner notification toolkit in British Columbia, Canada

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BACKGROUND:

One public health strategy to reduce the burden of sexually transmitted infections (STI) is partner notification (PN), where sexual partners of someone diagnosed with an STI are notified and encouraged to seek treatment and testing. Research has shown that enhanced PN (the patient is given educational information to pass along to sexual partner(s)) leads to improved outcomes.

The BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) is a provincial communicable disease research and reporting agency in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. The BCCDC operates two STI clinics in Vancouver and conducts much of the partner notification and follow-up for chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis cases in BC. Due to steadily increasing STI rates provincially, there is strong interest in providing newly diagnosed patients with online tools to enhance their sexual health literacy and ability to notify their sexual partners themselves.

OBJECTIVES:

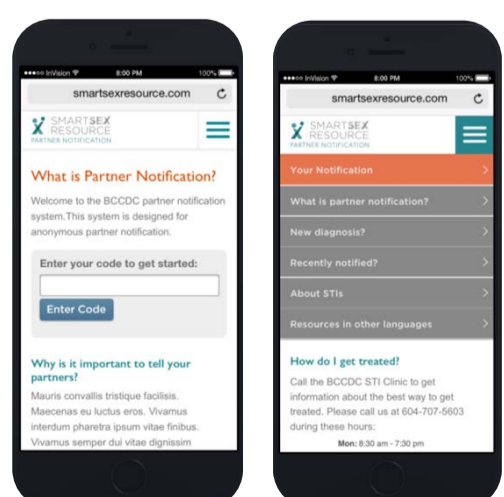
The purpose of this study was to focus group test a proposed online PN toolkit (Talk2Them), initially designed based on formative research (survey, focus groups) undertaken in 2014. Specifically:

1. To ensure the toolkit meets the needs of patients newly diagnosed with an STI and their sexual partners.
2. To confirm the toolkit is a usable resource for clinicians providing STI diagnoses and can be integrated into current health care practice.

FOCUS GROUP METHODS:

- Behavioral Ethics Board approval received.
- Three patient focus groups held with youth (<30 yrs), gay & bisexual men, and BCCDC STI clinic attendees
- Four clinician focus groups held with BCCDC STI nurses, provincial STI nurses, and youth clinic nurses.
- Focus group guides differed for patients vs. clinicians.
- Qualitative thematic analysis conducted using a “scissor & sort” method.

THE TALK2THEM TOOLKIT:



The proposed toolkit focuses on key reportable infections: chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, and HIV. The Talk2Them website will provide infection-specific education, as well as BC-relevant information on testing and treatment, tips for talking to partners, and downloadable resources for patients and partners.

Figure 1: Toolkit homepage and resources

The proposed toolkit features an invitation-based notification platform; only patients with a confirmed STI diagnosis will be offered the option of anonymously emailing or texting partners through the platform.

Each notification will link to a webpage tailored to the specific STI(s) exposure; which will include information on how to seek treatment and contact a sexual health nurse.

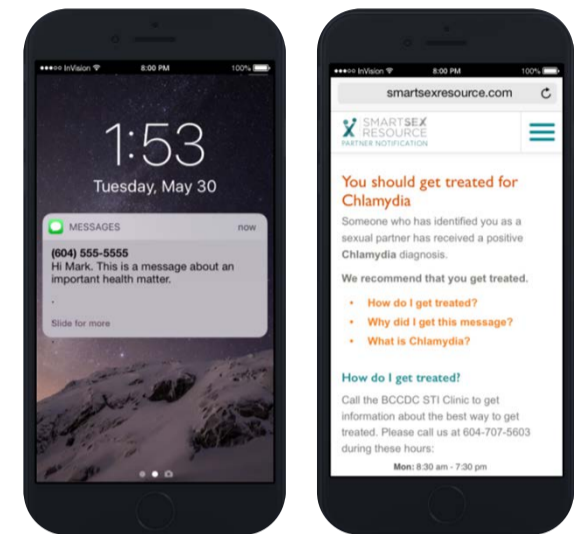


Figure 2: Notification messaging

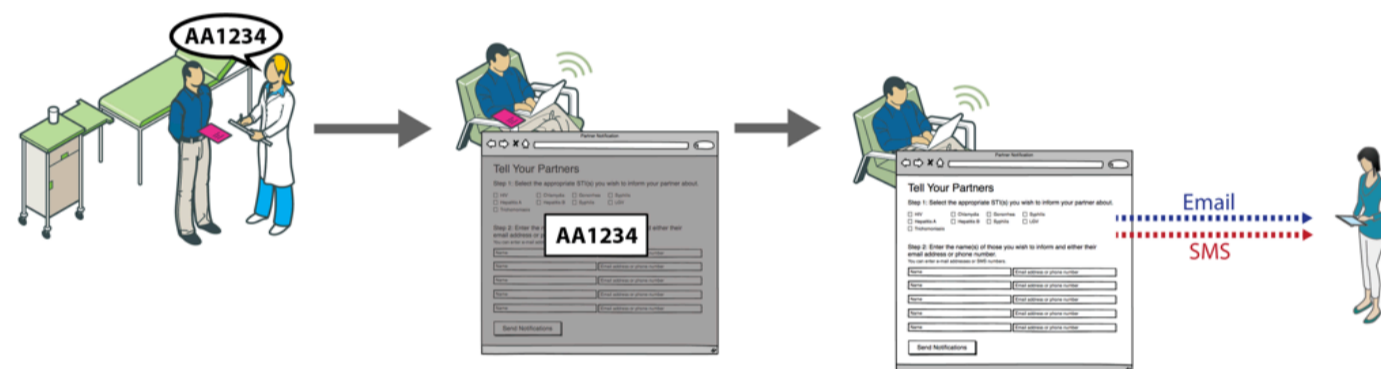


Figure 3: Invitation process

RESULTS:

Patient focus groups had 13 participants; clinician focus groups had 66 participants. Discussions were coded into three topic areas: (1) suggestions for improvement, (2) barriers to success, and (3) fundamental considerations, such as confidentiality and simplicity. Patient and clinician opinions did not differ, though patients had a greater interest in customizing the notification message.

“It just fills the message for you because it might be awkward. ‘Cause what do you say? This says it for you.” – Female, 24.

Barriers included fears that messages will cause anxiety or be mistaken for spam. Both patients and clinicians had concerns about including HIV, but felt that reference to a government agency would increase the credibility of the message.

“I can see it being scary that you just got an STI, don’t know who sent you the notification, and now I have to call an STI clinic I don’t know.” – Female, 27.

Patients and clinicians were receptive to the toolkit, with clinicians confirming that this could be used in their practice.

“I’ve been asked about notification services from nurses across the province.” – Provincial Nurse.

Discussion also highlighted a strong reluctance among patients to seek treatment before testing in the event they received a notification.

CONCLUSIONS:

Acceptability and willingness to use an online PN toolkit within BC was demonstrated.

These data will be used to inform the final design and development of the Talk2Them toolkit.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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