

Wrapping Up "Wrap It Up AK"

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Introduction/Overview

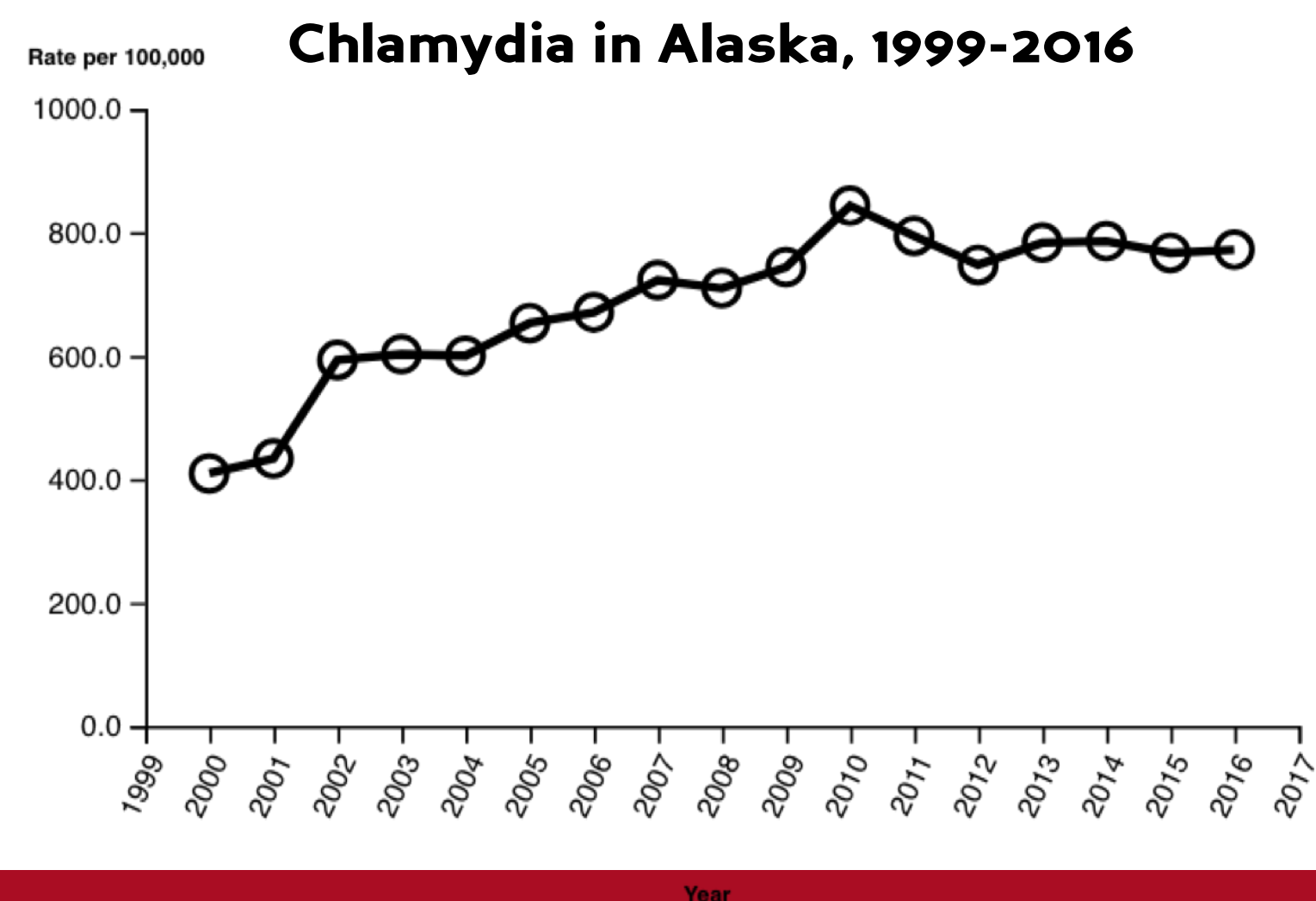
The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) HIV/STD Program (I Know Mine) and Alaska Health and Social Services (AHSS) launched "Wrap It Up Alaska" in 2013. Through the "Wrap It Up AK" campaign, they distribute free condoms throughout Alaska packaged in red matchbooks that are decorated with an Alaskan image and a euphemistic sex-related slogan. The nature of the slogan – edgy, comedic, and culturally relevant – is meant to catalyze conversation about STDS/HIV and promote safe sex to vulnerable demographics.

In 2013, the state had record STD rates, which disproportionately affected minorities and young adults (CDC). Seeking solutions beyond treatment, ANTHC and AHSS resolved upon innovative safe sex promotion and improved sex education. The "Wrap It Up" campaign shines light on the historical issue of STDs in Alaska and addresses the current need for adequate preventative measures by using relevant, culturally-specific humor to appeal to its audience.

Focused Historical Inquiry

The year "Wrap It Up AK" launched, gonorrhea and syphilis rates had nearly doubled and Alaska had either the highest or second-highest rates of chlamydia in the nation (CDC). According to the CDC, STDs disproportionately affected Alaskans ages 20-34 and minorities (CDC). Susan Jones, Alaska's HIV and STD program manager, is quoted as saying that the issue has become bad enough that the state legislature has agreed to increased funding to reduce Alaska's STD rate - the first time in recent memory the state has agreed to give money to a prevention program targeted at a specific, high risk group (qtd. O'Malley).

Many public health researchers attribute the increased STD rates to insufficient reproductive health and family planning resources, as well as limited sex education (Satterwhite). Other contributing factors include the popularity of online or app-based "hook-up" services; studies have shown that sex partners who meet online are more likely to report engaging in unprotected sex and high-risk sexual practices (Wohlfeiler).



Historical Inquiry

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) were first brought to Alaska by Russians in the early 18th century. Before contact with the Russians, most ethnohistorians agree that syphilis and gonorrhea were absent from Alaska Native populations. Unfortunately, by the arrival of Captain Cook, many Alaska Native populations along the Aleutians and on Kodiak Island were afflicted with STDs, most commonly syphilis. In 1778, Cook journaled that "venereal distemper is not unknown to these people" (qtd. Fortune 241) and his surgeon, David Samwell, wrote that "some of the ship's company had contracted venereal disease from the Aleuts" (qtd. 242). Captain Cook's second in command, Captain Charles Clerke, wrote that "venereal distemper" is ...

"that heavy Curse attending every set of People, who are unfortunate enough to get by any means European connections."

(qtd. Fortune 241)

The prevalence of STDs in Alaska has fluctuated throughout the past two centuries. Isolated communities, lack of infrastructure for traveling, and limited medical resources made it difficult to control STD outbreaks early in Alaska's history, and each wave of new settlers brought a host of medical issues. Syphilis was exceptionally hard to control, as it was once referred to as the "great imitator" (Fortune 250). Its unknown exactly how widespread syphilis infections were, and it's not unlikely that syphilis cases were overdiagnosed. As Alaska became more structured under a local government, and as public health services were given oversight of the health of Alaskans, rates of STDs declined from their nearly epidemic-proportions, yet, even today, they have never been within an "acceptable range" (Fortune 254).

After the U.S. purchased Alaska in 1867, the U.S. Bureau of Education assumed the responsibility of providing for the health and education of Alaskans Natives. They pushed health education in schools and assigned nurses to the villages. In 1919, the Territorial Legislature created the office of Commissioner of Health, who was expected to collect information on communicable diseases. The responsibility of education, health care, welfare and relief was transferred to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1931. Health resources in Alaska continued to expand throughout the 20th century, spurred on by the military activity during WWII. Statehood in 1959 resulted in the Department of Health and Welfare (now called Department of Health and Social Services). In 1971, Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act and the Alaska Native consumer controlled organizations were implemented through Alaska. Today, these Native health corporations (like ANTHC) are the center of health care and education in most of rural Alaska (Hickel).

Linguistic Analysis

The intent of "Wrap It Up AK" is to promote "safe", or protected, sex by catalyzing discussion amongst older teens and young adults. In an effort to attract the interest of this demographic, ANTHC and AHSS composed the slogans to make people laugh and draw attention (O'Malley). The "Wrap It Up AK" condom wrappers employ taboo topics and euphemistic vernacular to catalyze discussion.

"Wrap It Up AK" uses an approach to sexuality education that combines humor with pertinent information about sex. In a study conducted on the use of humor in sexuality education, researchers found that although humor lessens the awkwardness of its content and helps create a more open space for discussion, it has the potential to reinforce negative norms of gender and sexuality within a culture (Allen). For example, one of the "Wrap It Up" condoms has an image of a plane and the slogan "happy landing", reducing women and sex to accomplishments (as in "landing a job").

Although some of the designs may play into negative cultural conceptions of sex and gender, they also embrace Alaska's cultural quirks. Alaska is a diverse state, and "Wrap It Up AK" has a condom for everyone: hikers ("Before you summit"); snowboarders ("No freestyling"); fisherman ("Avoid bycatch"); even airforce ("Latex wingman").

References

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