



The Hidden Epidemic: Confronting Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Committee on Prevention and Control of Sexually Transmitted Diseases, Institute of Medicine

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The United States has the dubious distinction of leading the industrialized world in overall rates of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), with 12 million new cases annually. About 3 million teenagers contract an STD each year, and many will have long-term health problems as a result. Women and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to these diseases and their health consequences. In addition, STDs increase the risk of HIV transmission.

The Hidden Epidemic examines the scope of sexually transmitted infections in the United States and provides a critical assessment of the nation's response to this public health crisis. The book identifies the components of an effective national STD prevention and control strategy and provides direction for an appropriate response to the epidemic. Recommendations for improving public awareness and education, reaching women and adolescents, integrating public health programs, training health care professionals, modifying messages from the mass media, and supporting future research are included.

The book documents the epidemiological dimensions and the economic and social costs of STDs, describing them as "a secret epidemic" with tremendous consequences. The committee frankly discusses the confusing and often hypocritical nature of how Americans deal with issues regarding sexuality--the conflicting messages conveyed in the mass media, the reluctance to promote condom use, the controversy over sex education for teenagers, and the issue of personal blame.

The Hidden Epidemic identifies key elements of effective, culturally appropriate programs to promote healthy behavior by adolescents and adults. It examines the problem of fragmentation in STD services and provides examples of communities that have formed partnerships between stakeholders to develop integrated approaches.

The committee's recommendations provide a practical foundation on which to build an integrated national program to help young people and adults develop habits of healthy sexuality.

The Hidden Epidemic was written for both health care professionals and people without a medical background and will be indispensable to anyone concerned about preventing and controlling STDs.

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