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Within Australia, some of the most common STIs include: herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV2), which is estimated to affect about one in eight adults (12 per cent) over 25 years; and chlamydia and gonorrhoea, which predominately affect individuals aged between 15 and 24 years.

Many individuals consider themselves not at risk of contracting an STI due to these infections having a long historical association with deviant behaviour. This perception is particularly heightened in young people due to their general perception of invulnerability, which often hinders the thought of the possible consequences of engaging in high-risk behaviours, such as practising unsafe sex. Due to these perceptions, being diagnosed with an STI can lead to denial and non-disclosure of having an STI to sexual partners. Denying having an STI and subsequent non-disclosure, allowed these women to preserve their integrity and project a healthy self and sexual image to potential partners.

A PhD study undertaken by Dr Leah East at the University of Western Sydney focused on young women who had been diagnosed with an STI (genital herpes, chlamydia and HPV between the ages of 18 to 30 years). This study found that the participants did not believe they were at risk of contracting this type of infection due to holding negative views of people who contract STIs. Due to these perceptions, participants described feeling overcome with shame at the diagnosis. The shame felt by some of these women led them to deny being diagnosed with an STI to themselves and others, which in turn led to participants not disclosing having an STI with subsequent sexual partners.

Implementing and promoting strategies to facilitate acceptance of being diagnosed with an STI has the potential to minimise non-disclosure rates, reduce the incidences of these infections and can possibly reduce the number of individuals who engage in high-risk sexual behaviours that expose people to STIs.

References