



## MEDIA STATEMENT

Contact: Simon Whalley, Caitlin Murray

Email: [simon.whalley@mandfhealth.com](mailto:simon.whalley@mandfhealth.com) / 0207 492 1783, [caitlin.murray@mandfhealth.com](mailto:caitlin.murray@mandfhealth.com) / 0207 492 1780

### ***Influential Parliamentary health group highlights urgent need for increased funding and accountability in sexual health***

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The British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH) and the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) jointly welcome the publication of an important new sexual health report from the influential Parliamentary cross-party Health and Social Care Select Committee.

The report, which marks the culmination of a ten month-long inquiry by the Committee, sets out a number of powerful recommendations for the Government and national health agencies to act upon, to help address 'serious, concerning trends and inequalities' in sexual health that have emerged in recent years.

The inquiry was launched after sustained campaigning from BASHH on the need for closer scrutiny on the funding and commissioning arrangements for sexual health services and prompted by worrying developments in recent years which have seen dramatic increases in the diagnoses of several sexually transmitted infections (STIs), reduced provision of essential sexual healthcare and disruption to core training and workforce components. It also follows sustained cuts by the Government to the public health budget since the transfer of commissioning responsibilities to local government, which are having a direct and visible impact on the quality of care and level of access available for those most in need.

BASHH and the RCP welcome key recommendations identified by the Committee, including:

- **Development of a new sexual health strategy**  
Foremost amongst the Committee's recommendations is a recognition of the need for the development of a new national sexual health strategy, led by Public Health England and informed by a working group of representatives drawn from all sectors involved in commissioning and providing sexual health services. A new strategy will help to drive forward positive change in the delivery of effective, joined-up sexual health commissioning and set out a clear framework against which local areas can be assessed, in line with a new set of quality standards to guide this. The Committee also recognises the role of the strategy in helping to facilitate the introduction of longer contracts when sexual health services are tendered, to enable better strategic planning and to lessen the burden that tendering currently imposes.
- **Reversing damaging cuts to sexual health**  
The Committee's report highlights the 'false economy' of the cuts that have been applied to sexual health funding in recent years and calls for increased investment in the sector to represent a key priority in the forthcoming Government Spending Review. Data shows that councils will have been deprived of £700 million worth of real-terms public health funding – from which sexual health services are funded – between 2015/16 and 2019/2020 and the Committee found that this has had a direct and damaging impact on the breadth of sexual healthcare and level of access available to the public. Inadequate prevention and early intervention increase overall costs to the NHS and the Committee recommend that these should be addressed through the identification of minimum levels of spending that will support the delivery of high-quality services.
- **Improving access to key STI testing**  
Whilst overall rates of STIs have remained relatively stable in recent years, new diagnoses of gonorrhoea and syphilis are at their highest levels in decades, particularly affecting at-risk population groups such as men who have sex with men and driving increased antibiotic resistance. Recent years have also seen the emergence of a relatively 'new' STI, mycoplasma genitalium (Mgen), which has been wrongly presumed to be chlamydia and when left untreated, can cause infertility. Inconsistent provision of STI testing, often caused by insufficient resourcing, exacerbate these trends and is described as a 'significant concern' by the Committee. In response, it recommends that all clinics should be funded to provide a 'full range of STI testing' and that this should represent a clear focus for a future sexual health strategy.
- **Addressing challenges in sexual health training and workforce**

Fragmented commissioning arrangements have had a hugely disruptive impact on sexual health workforce planning and training, leading to real concerns over the potential for the situation to jeopardise people's sexual health in the coming years. The Committee recognised these worrying developments and call on those leading the current workforce review to set out a deliverable 10-year plan for the sexual health workforce in England. There should also be a clear programme of further action to re-establish training for both the current and future workforce, which needs to be at the heart of commissioning and service delivery planning.

- **Prioritising effective sexual health prevention**

Essential 'non-core' sexual health prevention services have been badly affected by funding cuts in recent years. Results from a recent BASHH survey revealed that there have been significant reductions across the country in the delivery of HIV prevention activity, outreach to vulnerable populations, cervical cytology, genital dermatology and psychosexual health services. The Committee recognised these worrying developments and call for prevention in sexual health to be better prioritised and better funded, and to represent a central part of the forthcoming Government Prevention Green Paper.

- **Making PrEP available to all who need it**

Despite clear evidence demonstrating that PrEP is highly effective at preventing HIV, there is currently a postcode lottery in terms of people's ability to access the treatment, jeopardising the Government's ambition to end HIV transmission in the UK by 2030. The Committee have acknowledged the 'huge frustration' around the situation and have called upon NHS England to review whether it is unreasonably restricting access to PrEP due to disputes about funding pathways rather than questions about its effectiveness. As highlighted in the report, PrEP should be universally available to all who need it, as soon as possible.

**Commenting on the report, Dr Olwen Williams, President of BASHH, said:**

*"We strongly welcome the Committee's recommendation for the development of a new national strategy and delivery of increased sexual health service funding. Years of damaging Government funding cuts and a disruptive approach to the commissioning and tendering of services has left sexual health in England at a tipping point, particularly when coupled with rising STI rates and the spread of antimicrobial resistant infection.*

*We are in desperate need of a clear and positive new vision for the sector and its workforce if we are to address these challenges and ensure that people are able to receive the best possible sexual healthcare. Implementing the Committee's recommendations must therefore be seen as a national priority and we look forward to working with partners to achieving this as soon as possible."*

**RCP registrar, Professor Donal O'Donoghue said:**

*"Implementing these recommendations is a crucial step towards turning the tide on sexual health inequalities in the UK.*

*We want everyone to have access to reliable evidence-based sexual health care across the UK, so urgent attention from the Government and from national health agencies is needed."*

- ENDS -

**Notes to editors**

- The British Association for Sexual Health and HIV is the lead professional representative body for those managing STIs and HIV in the UK. It seeks to innovate and deliver excellent tailored education and training to healthcare professionals, trainers and trainees in the UK, and to determine, monitor and maintain standards of governance in the provision of sexual health and HIV care. <http://www.bashh.org/>
- Everything we do at the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) is aimed at improving patient care and reducing illness. We are patient centred and clinically led, driving improvement in the diagnosis of disease, the care of individual patients and the health of the whole population, both in the UK and around the world. Our 36,000 members work in hospitals and the community across 30 different medical specialities and range from medical students to retired doctors. The RCP is the oldest medical college in England.

**Interviews**

- Interviews with sexual health experts can be coordinated by contacting [simon.whalley@mandfhealth.com](mailto:simon.whalley@mandfhealth.com) (0207 492 1783) and [caitlin.murray@mandfhealth.com](mailto:caitlin.murray@mandfhealth.com) (0207 492 1780).