“A study of the first and fourth year social care students’ knowledge and perceptions toward sexually transmitted infections”

Maura Finnegan

A00145900

I declare that this project is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Social Care Practice. It is entirely the work of the author and has not been submitted to any other University, Institute or College, or for any other academic award in this institute. I further declare that, where reference is not given in the text, that it is entirely my own work.

Signed: _________________________                           Date: _________________________
Maura Finnegan                                                                24th November 2011
Abstract

This research compares the knowledge of first and fourth year social care students towards sexually transmitted infections, and explores the opportunities for students to obtain information about the prevention and treatment of STIs within AIT. A quantitative method was administered, using first and fourth year social care students, 20 questionnaires were distributed amongst these students. From this research it was found that the difference between first and fourth years regarding their awareness of STIs was negligible. Prior to this research, the author believed that fourth year students would possess a better understanding of STIs, as it would be assumed that they had received this information in their prior years in the college. This was not the case; in fact most of the participants were not aware of the types of STIs, prevention or treatment of STIs. The research also found that not enough information is being distributed in the college and students appeared to be quite uneducated on the subject. It was concluded by the author that there was a complete lack of awareness of STIs among students and that AIT has a role to play in educating and informing all students about their sexual health and recommends AIT do more to offer this information and services.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction
1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to investigate the knowledge and perceptions of first year and fourth year social care students toward sexually transmitted infections.

The objectives are:

1. To compare first year and fourth year social care student’s knowledge and attitudes towards STIs.
2. To explore the opportunities available for students to gain information about prevention and treatment of STIs within AIT.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review
2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction
The literature review reflects the research conducted in relation to Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs); it explores the prevalence of STIs, students’ attitudes and awareness of STIs; it also looks at student health services within third level colleges.

2.2. Exploring STIs
According to The Women’s Health Council (2006), “Sexually Transmitted Infections are infections which can be passed on from one person to another during sexual contact. They are caused by bacteria, viruses and other microscopic organisms which are present in the blood, semen, body fluids or the pubic area of an infected person”.

There are a number of different STIs; some more prevalent than others. Most STIs can be alleviated with medication, however some may only be treated to lessen symptoms, but will still stay in your system once you have caught the infection (HSE 2007).

The two most common STIs, especially for women, in Ireland are ano-genital warts and Chlamydia. Ano-genital warts account for 39% of the total number of STIs recorded in 2004, this is the highest percentage to date. Males represented 34.8% of cases, while females accounted for 34.6%. Some types of the virus (types 16 and 18) are associated with cervical cancer in women (Women’s Health Council 2006).

The increase of Chlamydia trachomatis is the most astounding reported by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre, with a 1,044% increase between 1995 and 2004 and a further rise of 24.1% between 2003 and 2004. These figures are unlikely to show the true incidence of Chlamydia, as 70% of women and 50% of men will have no symptoms, and therefore will not get tested. Untreated Chlamydia in women can cause pelvic inflammatory disease, which can result in tubal infertility, ectopic pregnancy and chronic pelvic pain, it can also lead to infertility (The Women’s Health Council 2006). There has been a 700% increase in cases of Chlamydia in Ireland over the last 10 years (HPSC 2010).
2.3. Examining student’s attitudes and awareness in relation to STIs

Student Health STI Services (HSE 2011) states that health centres in third level institutions provide a perfect opportunity to target an at-risk population for the promotion of safe sexual practices and STI screening. Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) carried out a campaign in March 2010 called ‘A wii for a wee’, to highlight the prevalence of STIs among students, and also student’s attitudes towards STIs. This campaign focused on Chlamydia. In total 258 people provided urine samples for testing, 121 males and 136 females. The average age of students was 24 years. 13 participants (5% of the total figure) tested positive for Chlamydia, 7 males (5.8%) and 6 females (4.4%) tested positive. The findings of this campaign found there is an on-going problem of Chlamydia infection amongst students, and that there is a need for education programmes and service provision for this target group (20-26 years) (AIT 2010).

The CLAN survey was the first national lifestyle study undertaken by the Department of Health and Children on third level colleges. 21 third level colleges in Ireland were involved in the survey; which included undergraduate full-time students during the academic year 2002/2003. The aims of the CLAN survey were; “to establish a national student profile of lifestyle habits, to use the information in planning for student needs, and as a baseline to monitor trends and changes” (Hope, A., Dring, C. & Dring, J. 2005). In the area of sexual health the survey reports that 75% of students were sexually active, 76% of students reported to using a condom to protect themselves from STIs, while others answered they had one constant partner (40%), and some (3%) reported using no protection at all. Among sexually active students, 4% reported being diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection (Hope, A., Dring, C. & Dring, J. 2005).

In 1998, Athlone Institute of Technology carried out a Lifestyle Survey in Partnership with the Midlands Health Board on the students in AIT. Of a total student population of 2,831 students; a random sample of 566 students were chosen. Students in all years were surveyed. The gender mix was relatively even with 45.5% males and 54.5% females taking part. Faculty numbers were divided to ensure that they were representative of the true student
numbers in each faculty. The largest percentage of students in the study were in 1st year in the college, aged 18-20 years (42%) (Duggan & Johnston 2000).

One part of this study examined student’s sexual behaviour, with 74.3% of students reporting to having had sexual intercourse. The survey reported that sexual intercourse increases as the academic years progressed; with 68.8% of first years engaging in sexual intercourse compared to 79.3% of fourth years. The survey also found that first years were more likely to use condoms (70.8%) compared to fourth years (56.5%), the main reason for using protection being fear of pregnancy for all students surveyed (94.1%) (Duggan & Johnston 2000).

This survey implicates that most students are sexually active during their college years, and it is also quite possible in the authors opinion that college is where most young people experiment with sexual intercourse. This is very important in the view of the author as it shows that all third level colleges have a very important role to play in the promotion of sexual health and safe sex. The survey also conveys that the majority of students are more concerned about pregnancy and not concerned about contracting STIs.

2.4. Prevalence of STIs
According to the Women’s Health Council (2006), the number of cases of STIs has been increasing in Ireland over the past decade; there has been a 173.8% rise in the number of cases between 1994 and 2003. Young people are the group most affected with 55.9% of STIs occurring in 20-29 year olds between 2000 and 2004. In 2004 10,695 STIs were notified in Ireland, this figure was taken from the most recent surveillance report, which is an increase of 12.3% on 2003 statistics. The three most common STIs in both men and women are Chlamydia trachomatis, ano-genital warts and non-specific urethritis, (See Appendix 1).

The Irish Study of Sexual Health and Relationships survey 2006 is the largest nationally representative study on sexual knowledge, attitudes and behaviour ever undertaken in Ireland. The ISSHR provides nationally representative statistical data describing levels of sexual knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of adults (18 years and over) in Ireland for the first time. The Report provides detailed information and analysis of the responses received from 7,441 participants (Layte, McGee, et. al 2006). The ISSHR has found that 3% of men and 2% of women reported being diagnosed with an STI in the past, with younger people being the more likely to report the diagnosis (Layte, McGee, et. al 2006).
A quantitative survey was undertaken by the Health Promotion Office in AIT, during the academic year 2008-2009, in order to “identify the student’s knowledge, attitudes and behaviours regarding sexual health in order to target sexual health promotion and improve service provisions for the student populations within the college”. The survey was completed voluntarily by 329 students, 117 males (36%) and 212 females (64%) (Health Promotion Office 2008-2009).

The research identified that 90% of males and 91% of females reported they were sexually active, 90% of the students who took part were between 17 - 25 years of age. According to the survey, the majority of both males (76%) and females (72%) have never had a sexual health check up, despite the fact that 66% of the males and 43% of the females have had more than two partners in the last five years (Health Promotion Office 2008-2009).

When asked what they did about treating the STI, 30% of males and 13% of females reported doing nothing. 56% of females and 30% of males went to their local G.P. and 13% of females and 10% of males were too embarrassed to do anything (See Appendix 2).

The survey found that information on sexually transmitted disease is still a major concern for third level students. One of the more important outcomes from the survey was that a large proportion of students (90%), believed that AIT should provide a sexual health programme. It reports that; 73% of students would like to learn more about STIs, how to protect yourself, 64% on types of STIs, 63% on details of treatment of STIs and 63% on contraception (Health Promotion Office 2008-2009).

2.5. Student Health Services at AIT

AIT has a health centre on campus, however it does not provide an STI clinic, nor STI services, the only screening that students can avail of is Chlamydia testing. The nearest Sexual Health Clinic is Portiuncula Hospital, Ballinasloe, which is more than 15 miles away from the college, and there are long waiting lists (Public Health Nurse in AIT, 2011). In a report Surveillance of STIs 2005, which looked at STIs in Ireland and other European countries, the Health Protection Surveillance Centre highlighted the fact that there was no STI clinic in place in the HSE Midland region or in the HSE North Eastern region, and states that this matter should be addressed as a matter of priority (Women’s Health Council 2006).

As part of the Sexual Health Awareness and Guidance week that runs in the college in the week proceeding Valentine’s Day, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) distributes 35,000
sexual health awareness packs to colleges across the country. The college receives these packs which provide information on STIs and condoms to promote safer sex, which are than distributed to students (www.usi.ie 2011).

University College Dublin appears to be more advanced in the screening and treatment of STIs. They currently have an STI clinic on campus for students to avail of. They also have details of testing on their website for students to access easily and to be aware of the process of STI screening and what to expect from the examination. This service is very simple yet invaluable to the students as they can see where they have to go to get treated for STIs, the examination process and treatment involved (www.ucd.ie 2011). It is clear to see that UCD is much more advanced than Athlone Institute and also Galway-Mayo Institute (GMIT), GMIT does not provide an STI clinic and does not even have a health promotion service (www.gmit.ie 2011).

2.6. Conclusion
In conducting this research the author outlined the prevalence of STIs, student’s awareness and attitudes toward STIs and the accessibility of health services at third level for students.

The author agrees with the Student Health STI Services (HSE 2011), which states that health centres in third level institutions have a perfect opportunity to target an at-risk population for the promotion of safe sexual practices and STI screening. As the author has stated in the research, students are an at risk population due to their engagement in sexual activity, particularly in the college years. This means that extra measures should be put in place to ensure that students are fully aware of the risks associated with unprotected sexual intercourse and engaging in any unprotected sexual act.

The author aims to investigate student’s awareness of STIs and to explore their true knowledge of STIs, as it is important that they are fully aware of the impact and health risks that are associated with them. The author also aims to research the role AIT has to play in promoting sexual health among students and in the distribution of information regarding STIs. The college has a big responsibility to ensure students are aware of their sexual health and the prevention and treatment of STIs, as they have such a large population of young individuals attending the college, who are undoubtedly the most at risk of contracting an STI.

Although students may be somewhat aware of STIs, there is still a lack of knowledge amongst the student population as a whole. This conveys to the author that there is a need for
such a research project in AIT, to highlight the lack of awareness and knowledge amongst the student population. The author feels such a project has been outlined within this thesis, and that the authors’ objectives have been fulfilled to their knowledge.

Therefore, it is hoped that this thesis may contribute to prior research associated with this sensitive topic, as well as contributing to future studies.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology
3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction
The methodology chapter will explain the research method that the author has chosen to implement within this research. It will also reflect on the participants, ethical considerations, the limitations and the research procedure will be described.

3.2. Research Method
The main methodological approaches can be split into two categories; quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research is a research strategy that involves the collection of analysis and data, which focuses more on numbers and frequencies, such as questionnaires (Bryman 2004).

The aim of this research is to examine student’s knowledge and attitudes towards STIs, therefore a quantitative research approach was chosen for this study as the author felt it was more apt. Questionnaires allowed the author to refer to the sensitive nature of the topic being researched, and students were also able to answer the questions with the guarantee of anonymity. Student’s would have felt more comfortable answering the questions and would have been more open in their answers when they knew confidentiality was assured.

Questionnaires have many advantages; they guarantee anonymity which the author felt may encourage the respondents to answer the questions more honestly, therefore achieving the objectives. “By using a questionnaire the researcher provides standardisation and uniformity in the data-gathering process” (Domegan & Flemming 1999). They are also cost effective. They produce quick results and fewer opportunities for errors or bias by the presence or attitudes of the interviewer (Bryman 2002). Questionnaires also allowed the author to access a larger population sample.

When designing the questionnaire the author reflected on the objectives of the research project. To ensure the author received as much information as possible from the questionnaires and quality of information, both open ended and closed questions were asked.
3.3. Participants
The author administered questionnaires to first and fourth year social care students. Ten questionnaires were distributed to each year. These years were chosen as the author wished to investigate whether fourth year students had a more extensive knowledge of STIs and sexual health compared to first years. The reason for this was to determine whether AIT provides adequate information on STIs and educates the students enough on sexual health. The questionnaires were to be divided equally between males and females (i.e. 10 males and 10 females). The author compared the results to investigate whether there was a dramatic difference in the knowledge and beliefs between the two years and the different genders.

3.4. Ethical Considerations
The author was very mindful of ethical issues regarding the research, and was aware of the personal nature of the subject involved in the research project. The participants were informed of their rights prior to completing the questionnaire, these included the right to; participate voluntarily, remain anonymous and to have guaranteed confidentiality. In addition to this the author also provided the phone number for the STI clinic in Portiuncula Hospital, Ballinasloe at the end of the questionnaire, which is the nearest STI clinic to AIT.

3.5. Limitations
Some of the limitations which the author encountered were; the sample group in the research study was limited to twenty students, therefore, the findings may be an unrealistic representation of the entire student population. The author also hoped to have an equal number of both men and women answering the questionnaires, unfortunately however, due to the exceedingly higher percentage of females studying social care in AIT, in comparison to males, in both first and fourth year these expectations were unattainable. The only other option would have been to include all social care years, in order to have an equal gender mix; however, doing this would not have met my objectives. Another limitation was due to the personal nature of the research there was no guarantee that the participants were completely honest when answering all the questions. The author attempted to overcome this situation by avoiding asking the participants very intrusive questions about their own sexual health, which they may have felt very uncomfortable answering, and by guaranteeing that all participants would remain anonymous. Finally, time keeping was a major limitation; questionnaires are a
less time consuming method, however as the author was comparing first year and fourth year social care classes, drawing up the results was more time consuming than anticipated.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results
4. Results

4.1. Introduction
This chapter presents an analysis of the results. As outlined in the methodology, the author used a questionnaire to investigate students knowledge of STIs and the extent to which students are aware of the role AIT has to play in the promotion of sexual health amongst students, and if AIT can do more to promote sexual health around the college. The results are illustrated in narrative and graphical form and will be presented under the main objectives of the study.

4.2. Sample Participants
The sample population consisted of 20 participants; ten students from first year and ten students from fourth year social care. The author had hoped to acquire an even gender mix, however, more females participated in the questionnaires.

4.3. Results

4.3.1. Profile of Participants

Questions one to three were background questions. The profile of the participants included: first year students; seven females to three males, fourth year students; nine females to one male.

50% (5) of the participants in first year were aged 19-21, 40% (4) were aged 17-18. Only one participant (10%) was aged 26 or over. Most of the participants in fourth year, 60% (6) were aged 22-25. With 30% (3) of the participants aged 26 years and over. Only one participant (10%) was aged 19-21.
4.3.2. Student's Knowledge of STIs

Question 4 First Years:

Students were asked to list any STIs they were aware of. This was an open question to test the student’s knowledge of STIs.

The dominant STI known to all first year participants was Chlamydia, with 31% (8) being able to identify it. 19% (5) of participants were able to name both AIDS and Gonorrhoea.

Figure 1 (n=10)
Question 4 Fourth Years:

Fourth year participants were more aware of the different types of STIs than first years. As we can see from Figure 2, most of the participants were aware of the same STIs. Gonorrhoea being the more prominently known at 18% (8), 14% (6) identified Chlamydia, 11-12% of the participants (5) were able to identify public lice, genital warts and HIV.

![Fourth Years: Identification of STIs](image)

Figure 2 (n=10)
**Question 5 First Year/Fourth Year:**

Participants were asked to name the STI which does generally not display any symptoms; this was also an open question. Only 40% (4) of the first year participants gave the correct answer to this question, which was Chlamydia, 60% (6) of the participants did not know the correct answer or gave the wrong answer.

![First Years: Identification of the STI which is asymptomatic](image)

**Figure 3 (n=10)**

Only 20% (2) of the fourth year students were able to identify Chlamydia, four other STIs were identified incorrectly.

![Fourth Years: Identification of the STI which is asymptomatic](image)

**Figure 4 (n=10)**
Question 6:

The participants were questioned on who they believed are more susceptible to contracting STIs. Not many of the participants in both first and fourth year knew the answer; 80% (16) of both first and fourth year participants stated that men and women are equally susceptible to contracting STIs. Only 20% (2) of first year and 10% (1) of fourth year participants answered correctly, as they stated that women are more susceptible. 10% (1) of fourth year participants thought that men were more susceptible.

Question 7 First Years:

Participants were asked their opinion on how STIs are spread amongst people.

All of the first year participants answered from having sexual intercourse, 53% (6) of the participants answered that STIs were spread by having unprotected sex, 27% (3) answered that people contracted STIs from having sexual intercourse.

![First Years: How STIs are spread amongst people](image)

**Figure 5 (n=10)**
Question 7 Fourth Years:

While the majority of fourth year participants; 38% (5) answered unprotected sex, 23% (3) identified that STIs are spread through unprotected anal, oral and vaginal sex. 8% (1) answered the swapping of any bodily fluids can cause the spreading of STIs. 8% (1) of the participants answered that STIs can be spread through needles, which is very true of Hepatitis B and C and HIV.

Figure 6 (n=10)
Question 8:

Participants were asked what methods of contraception they considered are the best forms of protection against contracting an STI. This was a closed question; participants were given four choices to choose from.

100% (10) of the first year participants answered correctly, saying that condoms are the best form of protection against STIs. However, 27% (4) of the participants also believed that having one constant partner would protect them from contracting an STI.

46% (7) of fourth year participants answered condoms, 40% (6) assumed that having one constant partner would protect them from STIs. 7% (1) quoted that abstinence from sex. Participants chose more than one answer for this question.

4.3.3. Student’s Views Towards STIs

Question 9:

Participants were asked, if people are sexually active, should they have regular health screening checks; 90% (9) of first year participants answered yes, 100% (10) of fourth year participants believed that people ought to be going for regular checks. 10% (1) of the first year participants were unsure. Participants were also asked that if they answered yes, how often they believed individuals should get screened; 20% (2) of first year participants answered every 6 months, 30% (3) of fourth year participants believed individuals should get tested every year, 10% (1) responded every 1-2 years and 10% (1) responded every 3 months. 80% (8) of first year participants and 50% (5) of fourth year participants did not answer that part of the question.

Question 10:

Participants were asked if they contracted an STI, would they be aware of where to receive help.
50% (5) of first year participants answered that they would receive help from their local G.P. Similar to first year participants, 50% (5) of fourth years also identified their local G.P. 10% (1) of first year participants answered the STI clinic in St. James’ Hospital Dublin. 20% (2) of fourth year participants answered they would visit an STI clinic, 20% (2) of first year participants answered they would be aware of where to get help, and another 20% (2) admitted to not knowing where to get help. While the remaining 30% (3) of fourth year participants answered that they would know where to receive help.

**Question 11:**

Participants were asked if they were aware of where the nearest STI clinic is. This was an open question.

Out of the first year participants 70% (7) answered that they did not know where the nearest STI clinic is compared to 40% (4) of the fourth year participants. 10% (1) of first year participants believed they know where the nearest STI clinic is, 50% (5) of the fourth year participants responded to knowing where the nearest STI clinic is, but only two participants identified that it was Ballinasloe. 10% (1) of first year participants incorrectly thought that Mullingar had the nearest STI clinic, and the remaining 10% (1) believed that the nearest STI clinic to where they live is the GUIDE Clinic in St. James Hospital in Dublin. The remaining 10% (1) of fourth year participants answered the internet, which the author can only presume means they would search the internet for answers.
Question 12 First Years:

When asked how they would feel attending an STI clinic for the first time; 38% (5) admitted they would feel embarrassed and 38% (5) also said they would be nervous. 8% (1) responded that they would feel like they are being judged, only 8% (1) said that they would be fine as they would rather be safe. Some students gave more than one answer to the question.

![First Years: Feelings when attending an STI clinic for the first time](image)

Figure 7 (n=10)
Question 12 Fourth Years:

The majority of the fourth year participants also gave more than one answer for this question. 38% (6) of the participants have stated that they would be nervous going to an STI clinic for the first time, 31% (5) said they would feel embarrassed, and 6% (1) said they would be scared, feel vulnerable and even ashamed.

![Pie chart showing feelings when attending an STI clinic for the first time]

Figure 8 (n=10)
Question 13 First Years:

Participants were asked how they receive their information on sexual health.

Participants identified leaflets as their preferred method for obtaining information on sexual health at 22% (7), their local G.P. was identified at 19% (6). The one place in which first year students didn’t pick as an option was the student’s union in the college. Participants also chose multiple options for this question.

![First Years: Preferred methods for obtaining information on sexual health](image)

**Figure 9 (n=10)**
Question 13 Fourth Years:

The internet was chosen as their preferred source for obtaining information on sexual health at 18% (8). Leaflets and their local G.P. are also popular choices amongst this group, with 15% (7) choosing both of these options, only 2% (1) answered the students’ union.

Figure 10 (n=10)
4.3.4. The role AIT plays in the promotion of sexual health amongst students

Question 14:
Participants were asked if they believe AIT has a role to play in the promotion of sexual health amongst students.

70% (7) of the first year participants states that AIT does have a role to play, while 30% (3) answered no. 100% (10) of fourth year participants believe that AIT does have a role to play.

Question 15:
Participants were asked what information or services AIT provides that promotes the sexual health of students. This was left as an open question in order to determine if the students were aware of any services around the college.

40% (4) of first year participants do not know what information or services AIT provides, while another 40% (4) state that they provide leaflets. One participant responded that they don’t know what AIT offers to students. 10% (1) responded that they hold talks, while another 10% (1) stated that there were no services.

57% (8) of fourth year participants recognized ‘SHAG’ week as a service provided by AIT. A further 29% (4) responded that the sexual health magician provided information, 7% (1) identified leaflets, and also the health centre as a point of information.

Question 16:
Participants were asked if they think AIT should have an STI clinic.

90% (9) of first year participants responded that AIT should have an STI clinic, with only 10% (1) responding no. All of the fourth year participants believe that AIT should have a clinic at 100% (10).
Question 17 First Years:

When asked if they can think of any other way in which AIT can improve its services to promote the sexual health of students; the majority of the participants conveyed that AIT can. Only 7% (1) answered that they cannot think of any way in which to do so, 23% (3) of participants suggested providing more talks. While 15% (2) believe that more leaflets should be distributed around the college, and that mandatory classes should be organised every year on STIs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method for promoting the sexual health of students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More Talks</td>
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<tr>
<td>More Leaflets</td>
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<td>Counselling</td>
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<td>Organise Classes on STIs</td>
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<td>Campaigns</td>
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<td>Make it more accessible</td>
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<td>No</td>
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Figure 11 (n=10)
Question 17 Fourth Years:

All of the fourth year participants can think of many ways in which AIT can improve its sexual health services. 36% (5) suggest that more information needs to be distributed around the college, 15% (2) added that AIT should build a clinic for students. They also believe that more posters should be put up, and classes should be given, particularly to first year students. This was an open question; the reason for this was the author felt it would portray the participant’s real opinions on what services they want AIT to provide, to promote the sexual health of students.

Figure 12 (n=10)
4.4. Summary of findings

- 80% (8) of both first year and fourth year students believed that both men and women are equally susceptible to contracting STIs.

- 23% (3) of fourth year participants, and none of the first year participants, identified that STIs can be spread through unprotected anal, oral and vaginal sex.

- Only 50% (5) of both first year and fourth year students would know where to avail of help if they needed it.

- 70% (7) of first year participants and 50% (5) of fourth year students don’t know that Portiuncula Hospital in Ballinasloe is the nearest STI clinic to AIT.

- Only 2% (1) of fourth year participants and none of the first year participants would avail of the student union services for sexual health.

- 90% (9) of first year and 100% (10) of the fourth year participants believe that AIT should have an STI clinic.

- The majority of first year and fourth year students can think of different methods for AIT to improve its services in relation to the promotion of sexual health amongst students.
CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion
5. Discussion

5.1. Introduction
This chapter aims to discuss the reported findings from chapter 3, whilst referring back to the literature review. The findings of the research will be analysed in terms of their relevance to the objectives that are stated in chapter 1.

5.2. Objective 1: To compare first year and fourth year social care student’s knowledge and attitudes towards STIs.

Firstly the author wanted to gain an insight into the student’s knowledge of STIs, as it is important to be aware of their level of understanding of STIs. The participants used in this study were first and fourth year students from social care, the author believed that it was important to gain the insight of these young participants as the number of cases of STIs has been increasing in Ireland over the past decade, according to the Women’s Health Council (2006), there has been a 173.8% rise in the number of cases between 1994 and 2003. Young people are the group most affected with 55.9% of STIs occurring in 20-29 year olds between 2000 and 2004.

Question 4 asked the participants to identify the STIs that they were aware of; most of the first year participants identified Chlamydia, Gonorrhoea and AIDS. The fourth year participants were able to name more STIs than the first years. The author expected this response; believing fourth year participants would be more knowledgeable, from gaining information during their years spent in the college. Gonorrhoea was the most recognised, with many of the participants also being able to identify Chlamydia. Interestingly, thrush was picked as an STI by 10% (1) of participants, in both first and fourth year responses. Although thrush can be passed on to your partner through unprotected oral, anal and vaginal sex, it is not considered an STI (HSE 2007).

Question 5, asked the participants to name the STI which does usually not display any symptoms; astonishingly only 20% (2) of the fourth year participants, in comparison to 40% (4) of the first years, were able to identify Chlamydia. The author was very surprised to learn about the lack of awareness the participants have around the symptoms of STIs, especially
considering there has been a 700% increase in cases of Chlamydia in Ireland, over the last 10 years (HPSC 2010). The author strongly believes that more information, such as leaflets and posters on the types of STIs and also their prevention and treatment, should be distributed around the college for students to avail of. According to the Student Health STI Services (HSE 2011) health centres in third level institutions provide a perfect opportunity to target an at-risk population for the promotion of safe sexual practices and STI screening.

Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) carried out a campaign in March 2010 called ‘A wii for a wee’, this campaign focused on Chlamydia, out of the 258 people tested, 13 participants tested positive. The findings of this campaign found there is an on-going problem of Chlamydia infection amongst students and the need for education programmes and service provision for this target group (20-26 years) (AIT 2010).

The participants were asked who is more susceptible to contracting STIs; the majority of participants believe that both men and women are equally susceptible. This is quite frightening, especially considering the majority of students who answered the questionnaire were women, they may be putting themselves at risk of contracting an STI, without realising their biological make up makes it easier for them to catch an STI compared to men.

Participants were also asked how they believe STIs are spread amongst individuals, although many of the participants in both first and fourth year answered unprotected sex, they did not specify whether this was oral, anal or vaginal sex. This leads the author to believe that participants are not fully aware of all of the ways STIs can be spread; which could make them more at risk of contracting STIs.

When asked what the best form of contraception is, most of the participants responded condoms are. However, 40% (4) of first year and 60% (6) of fourth year participants answered having one constant partner. The fewer sexual partners a person has, the less likely they are to contracting an STI, however, this is not guaranteed. Also, if their partner has had unprotected sex in the past and has not been tested, there is a risk of contracting an STI from them.

The majority of both the first and fourth year participants believe that people who are sexually active should get regular sexual health screening checks. However, the author doubts if the students would attend an STI clinic to obtain help in treating an STI, or even going to get a sexual health screening check, as 70% (7) of first year and 50% (5) of fourth year
participants do not know where the nearest STI clinic is. In order to receive a full health screening check, participants must attend an STI clinic, as G.P.’s do not carry out a full sexual health screening. It is very important in the author’s view that students do get sexual health screenings regularly, especially when AITs Lifestyle Survey states that 74.3% of students reported to having had sexual intercourse (Duggan & Johnston 2000).

5.3. **Objective 2:** To explore the opportunities available for students to gain information about prevention and treatment of STIs within AIT.

The common consensus amongst the participants was that AIT has a role to play in the promotion of sexual health amongst students. First year participants mainly chose leaflets and posters as their main sources of information on STIs, this was similar with the fourth year participants’ responses. Therefore AIT should be placing and distributing these all around the college campus to reach as many students as possible. Good locations for these would be in bathrooms, and on toilet doors especially, as individuals would feel more comfortable picking them up there, than in front of other students in the canteen.

Question 15 asked participants, what information or services AIT provides that promotes the sexual health of students. 40% (4) of the first year participants said they were unsure of what services AIT provide in relation to sexual health. Another 40% said that AIT provide leaflets on the STIs, this however, does not seem sufficient enough as it shows that many participants are unaware of any kind of services provided by AIT. It is important to target first years, as they may start experimenting with alcohol, sex or drugs, when they are away from home and feeling more independent. They are a vulnerable group, and therefore if they are educated at an early stage in college they will know how to protect themselves and where to get help, if the information is given to them once they begin.

57% (8) of fourth year participants recognised ‘SHAG’ week as a service provided by the Students Union in AIT. It was expected that fourth years would identify ‘SHAG’ week above first years as it does not occur until February. AITs Lifestyle Survey (1998), also reported that sexual intercourse increases as the academic years progress, with 68.8% of first years engaging in sexual intercourse compared to 79.3% of fourth years (Duggan & Johnston 2000). This suggests to the author that college students need to be targeted early to ensure they are aware of all safe sexual practices. The survey also found that first years were more likely to use condoms 70.8% compared to fourth years 56.5% (Duggan & Johnston 2000). The author finds these statistics quite shocking, and believes this research quite possibly...
conveys that students have not been educated properly on their sexual health during their years in AIT.

The author feel strongly that students in AIT need to be educated more on STIs, as young people are engaging in unprotected sexual intercourse, putting themselves at risk of contracting STIs. A survey undertaken by the Health Promotion Office in AIT (2008-2009), identified that 90% of males and 91% of females reported they were sexually active. According to the survey, the majority of both males and females have never had a sexual health check up, (2008-2009).

A large number of the participants feel the need for an STI clinic on campus. If AIT were to have an STI clinic more students may avail of this service.

The majority the participants believed that AIT can improve its services regarding the sexual health of students. Some participants believe that there should be more talks on STIs, such as mandatory classes for each year and more leaflets distributed around the college.

5.4. Evaluation of Method
The quantitative research method in the author’s view proved successful as it allowed the author to target the specific sample groups that were required for the research project, and for gaining the required information that was needed. The use of questionnaires was appropriate in terms of encouraging honesty and guaranteeing confidentiality, especially for the sensitive subject that was being researched. The questionnaire is a simple and cheap method for gathering information; it is also a very familiar method for students, which is very practical as they would not feel intimidated or confused when answering the questionnaire. This research method is also less time consuming for students as it only takes up about 15 minutes of their time, and therefore they may be more likely to participate. It allows the author to gain information from a larger number of respondents and therefore obtain more opinions on the topic. One limitation the author found with the questionnaire was the participant’s comprehension of some of the questions. For example, question seven, the participants were asked how STIs are spread amongst people; the author was hoping for a broader description of methods such as anal, oral or vaginal sex, rather than simply answering sexual intercourse.
CHAPTER SIX

Recommendations
6. Recommendations

The author recommends that students need to be educated more on STIs. First and foremost students should be aware of the prevention of STIs. They also need to be informed of the different types, the symptoms, the effects they have and how to treat them.

Students should be informed of the nearest STI clinic, facilitating regular check-ups and treatment if necessary. The majority of students said that they would like to have an STI clinic on campus. As funding would be very limited, the author suggests having a pop-up clinic every two weeks that students could avail of, to ensure the positive sexual health of all students.

AIT needs to provide more services for students; mandatory classes would be a very good way of educating young people on STIs. If they were to target first years and provide them with classes, then students would know about STIs and the dangers associated with them.

Finally, the author would recommend the distribution of more leaflets and posters promoting the relevant information on STIs and the risks of unprotected sexual intercourse. These leaflets could be placed in bathrooms all around the campus. Therefore students wouldn’t feel conscious of people seeing them picking up leaflets, as most leaflets are merely placed around the college during SHAG week.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion
7. Conclusion

The aim of this research project was to investigate the knowledge and perceptions of first year and fourth year social care students toward sexually transmitted infections. The author was shocked to find that there was not a substantial difference on the knowledge of STIs between first and fourth years. This conveys that more education on this topic is vital for all students in AIT. Although most of the participants believe that people who are sexually active should get regular health screening, the author is very unsure whether the students would go for sexual health screening checks themselves. This conclusion is drawn up as the majority of the participants do not know where the nearest STI clinic is, and therefore have never availed their services. As the research throughout the project has shown, young people are the most at risk of contracting STIs, and therefore need to be targeted urgently with regards to education about STIs.

As mentioned throughout this research project, participants believe that AIT could do more to improve its services with regard to sexual health, as many students are unaware of the many facts associated with STIs. AIT need to introduce new methods of educating their many students and be rigorous in their efforts.

Ultimately the lack of awareness may lead to vulnerable students not looking for help due to the fact that they are unsure of where to go and feel embarrassed asking. They may not get checked for an STI, and therefore go untreated, leading to further complications. Students are also unaware of protection against STIs, which could make them more susceptible to contracting them.

In conclusion, it is the view of the author that this research highlights the distinct lack of awareness among students in relation to STIs in AIT. The author believes that the initial objectives have been fulfilled, and that the findings will add to the existing body of literature. Similar studies in the future may also benefit from this research, possibly using a larger sample size, which may reinforce the authors’ findings and may emphasize the critical need for education amongst students and hopefully alleviate the problem.
LIST OF REFERENCES
Reference List


Public Health Nurse in AIT, 2011 Personal Conversation with Author.


LIST OF APPENDICES
Appendix 1

The three most common STIs in both men and women:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STI</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chlamydia Trachomatis</td>
<td>1,264</td>
<td>1,492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ano-genital Warts</td>
<td>1,454</td>
<td>1,445</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-specific Urethritis</td>
<td>2,193</td>
<td>550</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Women’s Health Council 2006)

Appendix 2

When asked what they did about treating the STI, the students answered:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did nothing</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No money</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmacy</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visited own G.P</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visited other G.P</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visited Sexual Health Clinic</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t remember</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t bother</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure where to go</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No time</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self treatment</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visited college health centre</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanted SH clinic-none available</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3

My name is Maura Finnegan; I am a fourth year student studying Social Care Practice. As part of my course I am currently under taking a research project. The project that I am carrying out is a study into student’s knowledge and attitudes towards sexually transmitted infections and the role AIT plays the in promotion of sexual health amongst students. I would be grateful if you would complete my questionnaire, participation of this questionnaire is completely voluntary and the information gathered will be treated with the strictest confidence. There is no need to sign your name, respondents will remain anonymous and the information will be utilised for the sole purpose of the investigation and remain confidential.

Thank You,

Maura Finnegan
Questionnaire

Please tick (✓) the appropriate boxes for your answer.

General Information

Q.1 What gender are you:

Male □
Female □

Q.2 Are you aged between:

17-18 □
19-21 □
22-25 □
26 and Over □

Q.3 What year are you in:

First Year □
Fourth Year □

Student’s Knowledge of STIs

Q.4 Please list any Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) that you are aware of:

__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________

Q.5 Can you name the STI which does generally not display any symptoms?
Q.6 Who are biologically more susceptible to contracting STIs:

- Men □
- Women □
- Both □

Q.7 In your opinion, how are STIs spread amongst people?

__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________

Q.8 Which of the following methods of contraception in your opinion is the best form of protection against contracting an STI:

- Contraceptive Pill □
- Using Condoms □
- Having One Constant Partner □
- Other □

If other please state ____________________________________________________________

Student’s Views Towards STIs

Q.9 In your opinion, if people are sexually active should they have regular health screening checks:

- Yes □
- No □
- Don’t Know □

If yes, how often __________________________
Q.10 If you contracted an STI would you know where to get help?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Q.11 Do you know where the nearest STI clinic is?
________________________________________________________________________

Q.12 How do you think you would feel attending an STI clinic for the first time?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Q.13 How do you get information on sexual health (please tick appropriate boxes):

Family
Friends
College Health Centre
Local G.P
Posters
Internet
Leaflets
Television
Student’s Union
Other

If other please specify ________________________________

The role AIT plays in the promotion of sexual health amongst students

Q.14 Do you think AIT has a role to play in the promotion of sexual health?

Yes

48
No

Q.15 What information or services does AIT provide that promotes sexual health?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Q.16 Do you think that AIT should have an STI clinic?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Q.17 Can you think of any other ways in which AIT can improve its services to promote the sexual health promotion for students?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Thank you
If anyone feels they would like to avail of an STI screening after completing this questionnaire the number for the STI Clinic in Portiuncula Hospital in Ballinasloe is 090 9648 372. Thank you for your time.