WHO Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Brief sexuality-related communication: recommendations for a public health approach.

1.Sexuality. 2.Reproductive Health. 3.Sexually Transmitted Diseases – prevention and control. 4.Sexual Behavior. 5.Primary Health Care. 6.Counseling. 7.Guideline. I.World Health Organization.

ISBN 978 92 4 154900 4 (NLM classification: WC 140)

Layout by blossoming.it

BRIEF SEXUALITY-RELATED COMMUNICATION

Recommendations for a public health approach

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This guideline document was produced by the Department of Reproductive Health and Research (RHR), World Health Organization (WHO), under the leadership of Dr Igor Toskin. The expertise and support of many people have made the development of this guideline possible. This guideline document development process was initiated following an expert consultation in 2010, which was supported by WHO.

WHO would like to thank the members of the Guideline Development Group (GDG): Tamara Adrián-Hernandez, Elham Atalla, George Ayala, Bergen Hope Cooper, John Munroe Douglas,

ASSESS	**Awareness, Skills, Self-efficacy / Self-esteem, and Social Support**
BSC	**Brief sexuality-related communication**
CDC	**United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**
CINAHL	**Cumulative Index to Nursing & Allied Health database**
CREA	**Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action**
FGM	**Female genital mutilation**
GDG	**Guideline Development Group**
GRADE	**Grading of Recommendations, Assessment, Development and Evaluation**
LNK	**WHO Library and Information Networks for Knowledge**
MCA	**WHO Department of Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health**
MDG	**Millennium Development Goal**
MSB	**WHO Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse**
MSM	**Men who have sex with men**
NGO	**Nongovernmental organization**
PICO	**Population, intervention, comparison, outcome(s)**
RHR	**WHO Department of Reproductive Health and Research**
STI	**Sexually transmitted infection**
UNESCO	**United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization**
WHO	**World Health Organization**
WONCA	**World Organization of National Colleges, Academies and Academic Associations of General Practitioners / Family Physicians**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sexual health is gaining more and more attention from public health practitioners and health service providers because of its contribution towards overall health and well-being in both adults and adolescents. Health risks arising from unsafe sexual practices and sexuality-related human rights abuses such as sexual coercion together contribute to the global burden of disease.

Both research and consultations over the last decades have identified sexuality-related communication as an issue that requires urgent attention. While clients would like their health-care providers to discuss sexual health concerns, health workers lack the necessary training and knowledge to feel comfortable addressing such issues. There is a lack of clarity in the field as to the role of sexuality communication in primary care.

In 2008 the World Health Organization (WHO) commissioned a set of case studies on the integration of sexuality counselling into sexual and reproductive health services to serve as background to the development of this guideline. In 2010 an expert consultation convened by WHO's Department of Reproductive Health and Research (RHR) recommended the development of a guideline to facilitate the integration of this counselling into primary care services. A Guideline Development Group (GDG) was established in June 2012 comprising members working on sexual health in low- and middle-income countries, from all WHO regions and with equal gender representation. The GDG included academics, psychologists, doctors, public health specialists, lawyers and social scientists, all with expertise in developing programmes or offering clinical services to promote sexual health and well-being. It also included representatives of key constituencies with overlapping sexual health and rights expertise. Under the guidance of the GDG, a systematic review was undertaken and evidence from it was assessed by an independent researcher and a Grading of Recommendations, Assessment, Development and Evaluation (GRADE) methodologist using the GRADE framework. The GDG developed one good practice recommendation and two policy recommendations drawing on the expertise of the group and peer reviewers, the systematic review and insights from the Guideline Review Committee.

As this is an under-researched field, the recommendations in this guideline document provide health policy-makers and decision-makers in health professional training institutions with advice on the rationale for health-care providers' use of counselling skills to address sexual health concerns in a primary health care setting. Subsequent to the development of this guideline document on brief sexuality-related communication (BSC), WHO will develop and test specific techniques of BSC to guide health-care providers in improving the quality of their care. These will be published as a technical guideline.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This guideline document provides recommendations on content and ways to deliver BSC that complement the following WHO documents and guidelines on related topics:

- Sexual and reproductive health: core competencies in primary care – Attitudes, knowledge, ethics, human rights, leadership, management, teamwork, community work, education, counselling, clinical settings, service, provision, 2011 (http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9789241501002_eng.pdf)

- Guidelines: prevention and treatment of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections among men who have sex with men and transgender people: recommendations for a public health approach, 2011 (http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9789241501750_eng.pdf)

- Guidelines on preventing early pregnancy and poor reproductive outcomes among adolescents in developing countries, 2011 (http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9789241502214_eng.pdf)

1.2 OBJECTIVES AND TARGET AUDIENCE

The objective of this guideline document is to provide policy-makers and health-care professional training institutions with advice on the effectiveness of BSC as part of primary health care-level services, in order to improve the quality of sexual health-care and of training of health-care providers in BSC knowledge and skills.

There are two primary target audiences for this guideline:

- ***health service policy-makers who need to plan for the inclusion of BSC in health services and in performance monitoring systems***
- ***decision-makers in health-care provider educational institutions who need to train health-care providers on how to incorporate BSC into their practice.***

This guideline document assesses the effectiveness of BSC at the primary health-care level. The first point of care is variable, both within a country and internationally. For example, in some cases it may be general or family practitioners, while in others it may be local clinics, specific sexual health services such as STI clinics or HIV/AIDS centres, or reproductive health services such as family planning services, maternal care services or abortion services. In some areas the first point of care may be targeted to a specific population; e.g. youth, men who have sex with men, or sex workers. Such services may be in the public or private sector and can include nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations involved in health-care provision.

Those responsible for curriculum development in health education institutions will also benefit from this guideline document, particularly trainers of health-care providers or sexual education teachers. While this guideline document does not provide technical advice on specific content for such training (a topic that will be the subject of a subsequent guideline development process), it does assess the need to train health-care providers in BSC skills.

1.3 SCOPE OF THIS GUIDELINE DOCUMENT

This guideline document aims to assess the effectiveness of BSC at the first point of entry to health services. It does not address the role of systematic formal counselling, but rather the value of opportunistic support provided by diverse health-care providers at the primary level.

1.4 DEFINITIONS AND APPROACH

1.4.1 Sexual health and sexuality

Sexual health is fundamental to the physical and emotional health and well-being of individuals, couples and families, as well as to the social and economic development of communities and countries. The current WHO working definition of "sexual health", which arose from an international meeting of experts in 2002, captures a broad view:

Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled. (***37: 3***)

Sexual health cannot be defined, understood or made operational without a broad consideration of sexuality, which underlies important behaviours and outcomes related to sexual health. The WHO working definition of "sexuality" is:

… a central aspect of being human throughout life [that] encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors. (*37: 4*)

In the context of se

husband), and a range of vaginal practices that may be associated with negative health outcomes (*75*)

- Mental health issues related to sexual health including:
  - the sexual health needs of people with mental health problems; e.g. higher rates of sexual dysfunction in people with depression (*8, 113*) or other sexual problems treated with certain antidepressants (*105*), and the influence of antidepressant drugs on sexual health (*8*)
  - mental health issues associated with sexual health and high rates of stress, stigma and discrimination e.g. higher rates of mental disorders and mental distress among some populations of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons (*14, 101*).

Specific populations are highlighted as being particularly in need of sexual health services, including young people of all sexual orientations; people with physical disabilities, mental challenges and chronic illnesses; intersex people; incarcerated populations; transgender populations; and indigenous populations (*71*).

The ability of people to achieve sexual health and well-being depends, among other things, on their access to comprehensive information about sexuality, their knowledge about the risks they face, and their vulnerability to the adverse consequences of sexual activity. To achieve sexual health, people also need opportunities for social support, access to

(*26, 37*). Unlike professional counselling, BSC does not require provider continuity. In addition, these skills are applied during the length of a typical primary health care visit.

BSC takes into account the psychological and social dimensions of sexual health and well-being as well as the biological ones (*99*). It aims to support clients in reformulating their emotions, thinking and understanding, and subsequently, their behaviour; that is, by developing their capacity for self-regulation, clients are able to exercise their sexuality with autonomy, satisfaction and safety (*38, 140, 121*). It is rooted in the understanding that there is often a gap between intention and behaviour. BSC can enable clients to bridge this gap by helping them to establish clear goals, as well as to initiate and sustain their motivation and actions towards achieving these (*38*).

BSC uses an approach in which most of the time during a primary health care visit is spent listening to the client's concerns, in contrast to the health-care provider using most of the time to impart his or her expertise (*11, 19*). The aim is to help clients identify ways to address their concerns. This is described as a "client-centred" approach (*134*

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS

2.2 IDENTIFYING, APPRAISING AND SYNTHESIZING THE AVAILABLE EVIDENCE

No external funding for this guideline was obtained. WHO funded this guideline document's development entirely.

2.2.1 The GRADE framework

WHO follows the Grading of Recommendations, Assessment, Development and Evaluation (GRADE) approach for the development and review of recommendations (***150***). This approach is increasingly being adopted by organizations worldwide to rate the quality of evidence and strength of various types of recommendations (***61***). GRADE emphasizes a structured, explicit and transparent approach to grading and consensus-building (***64***).

GRADE separates the rating of the quality of evidence from the grading of the recommendation. In the context of recommendations, quality reflects the confidence that the estimates of effect are adequate to support a particular recommendation ***(9)***. The GRADE system classifies the quality of evidence into one of four levels: high, moderate, low or very low (***58***, ***59***, ***60***, ***62***, ***63***).

The strength of a recommendation reflects the extent to which we can be confident that the desirable effects of an intervention outweigh the undesirable effects (***64***). The GRADE system classifies recommendations into two strengths: strong and conditional. A recommendation can also be either in favour of or against the intervention of interest. The strength and direction of a recommendation are affected by the quality of evidence, balance of benefits and harms, values and preferences, resource use and feasibility of the intervention.

One good practice recommendation is also included in the framework. This is a type of recommendation that does not require supporting evidence (see Chapter 3) and thus its development does not follow the above-described process (57).

2.2.2 Search strategy

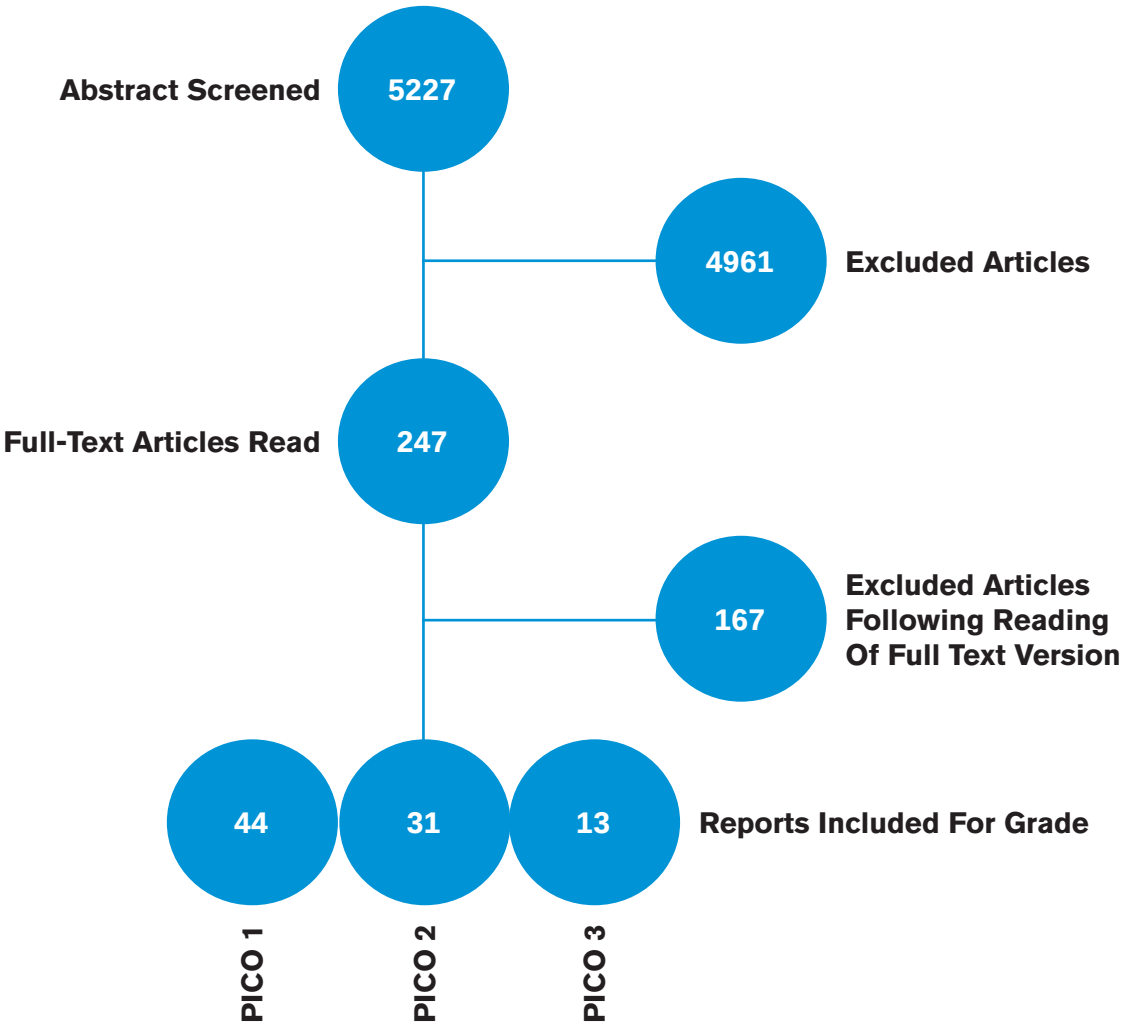
An independent researcher conducted a systematic review based on the population, intervention, comparator and outcomes (PICO) questions. The following electronic databases were searched: PubMed, ProQuest, Cumulative Index to Nursing & Allied Health (CINAHL), Jstor, Scopus / Science Direct, Cochrane Library, EBSCO, PsychINFO and Web of Knowledge. The search was reformatted from a Medical Subject Headings (MeSH)-based approach to a keyword search in order to focus on other databases and increase the number of unique citations. Keyword searches on Summon (covering ProQuest, CINAHL, Jstor, Scopus / Science Direct, Cochrane Library, EBSCO, CINAHL, Ovid Medline / PubMed, PsycINFO and Web of Knowledge) were performed using the following terms: sexual health, primary care, counselling, sexual dysfunction, sexual distress, sexual concerns, sexual misconceptions, STIs, HIV, unintended pregnancy, abortion, sexual violence, harmful practices, knowledge increase, well-being, autonomy, pleasure and training. No language or date restrictions were applied. Reference sections of included articles were also searched. Grey literature was retrieved from New York Academy of Medicine Grey Literature Report. Both published and unpublished articles were searched.

FIGURE 1. SYSTEMATIC REVIEW SELECTION PROCESS

Records identified through reference search and GDG:

References: 113
GDG: 52

Summons: 4057
PubMed: 870
Cochrane: 53
Grey literature: 9
Preliminary review: 73



The first face-to-face meeting of the GDG was conducted on 10–12 October 2012. The main outcomes of the meeting were decisions on:

- the scope of this guideline document;
- the use of PICO questions to govern the systematic search of the evidence (see Annex 2), and the evidence-retrieval strategy; and
- the modus operandi of the group and a common understanding of the process for the development of a guideline according to WHO requirements.

The GDG held several telephone conferences during this process as well as email conversations. These enabled the WHO Secretariat to finalize the outcomes in relation to each PICO question. Group members then scored the relative importance of each outcome on a scale from 1 to 9, where 7–9 indicates that the outcome is critical to a decision, 4–6 indicates that it is important, and 1–3 indicates that it is of low importance for decision-making. The average score for each outcome was used to determine the

Where there was a need for guidance but only low- to very low-quality research evidence was available, a recommendation was developed using the expertise of the GDG and the considerations given above (Recommendation 2).

The decisions of the GDG were then used to draft this guideline document. The first draft was reviewed by the GDG. All comments were collated by the Secretariat, with each comment reviewed and responses added to the comments in a table format. Relevant changes were then made to the document before the revised version was sent back to the members of the GDG for final review.

2.4 DOCUMENT PREPARATION AND PEER REVIEW

A second draft of the BSC guideline was reviewed by GDG members and peer reviewers of the various constituencies with a direct interest in this guideline document. They are listed in Appendix 2. Peer reviewers indicated that they found this guideline document relevant, appropriate and timely. Relevant revisions suggested by the GDG and peer reviewers and agreed upon by the Secretariat were made. The Guideline Review Committee subsequently reviewed this document and further revisions were made.

CHAPTER THREE

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION

3.1 DEFINITION

"Good practice recommendations" are overarching principles derived from the pooling of common sense, expert opinion, professional standards of practice, and established international agreements on ethics and human rights; they may or may not be informed by scientific evidence (*76*).

Good practice recommendations are considered essential for clarifying or contextualizing specific technical recommendations. They are particularly important when change needs to be implemented in environments that can be hostile or negative, such as those involving sexuality and sexual health and well-being. Given the prevalence of taboo and stigma associated with sexual norms and practices in many parts of the world, as well as the existence of legal barriers to the inclusion of some populations in accessing health services – be they private or public – the GDG found it necessary to include one such recommendation in this guideline document (see section 3.2.1).

3.2 RESPECT, PROTECT AND FULFIL HUMAN RIGHTS

Violations of human rights – including through social exclusion and gender inequality

that support their health and well-being (*4*); sexual stigma or homo-prejudice (*92*) may place lesbian, gay and bisexual people at heightened risk for poor mental and sexual health outcomes and violence (*101*); and violence and stigma may put transgender people and sex workers at higher risk of poor sexual health outcomes, and decrease their access to services (*93*). Gendered expectations for men can also endanger sexual health; for example, the social construction of masculinity in some settings can lead to increased pressure on (young) men to take risks and demonstrate sexual proficiency, while there is a lack of sexual health services specifically intended to meet the needs of young men (*70*).

Respect for, and protection and fulfilment of, human rights can have a measurable impact on sexual (and other) health outcomes (*55, 71*). Sexual rights embrace certain human rights that are already recognized in international and regional human rights documents, in other consensus documents and in national laws. Thus the application of existing human rights to sexuality and sexual health constitutes sexual rights. The international treaties that describe these human rights include: the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1965); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (adopted in 1966); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (adopted in 1966); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (adopted in 1979); the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (adopted in 1984); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted in 1989); and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (adopted 2006).

The human rights that are particularly relevant to matters of sexual health and well-being are the rights of all persons, free of coercion, discrimination and violence, to:

- the highest attainable standard of health, including access to sexual and reproductive health services;
- seek, receive and impart information related to sexuality;
- respect for bodily integrity;
- choose their partner;
- decide to be sexually active or not;
- consensual sexual relations;
- consensual marriage;

health status and prevention and treatment options so they can make informed decisions about addressing sexuality-related concerns and ill-health (*37*). Also, in keeping with the right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications (*119*) and the right to autonomy (*71*) – a cornerstone of clinical ethics – the client has the right to "evidence-based diagnostic and treatment options that are available, in order to participate actively in the decision-making process" (*69*). A rights approach to BSC also requires provider commitment to confidentiality and an environment for the BSC process that allows for confidentiality.

There is very limited attention in society to clients' human rights and their ability to realize those rights (*94, 96*). Van Reeuwijk and Nahar note, "[a] rights-based and sex positive approach leads to inclusion of outcomes such as empowerment and reduction of gender inequality, sexual violence, shame, fear and insecurity, discrimination and stigma" (*143: 67*). Moreover, an empowerment approach to sexuality education and communication is more likely to achieve desired sexual health outcomes than one without a rights orientation (*122, 131*).

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION

Health policy-makers and decision-makers in health-care professional training institutions need to ensure that, where BSC is introduced, it respects, protects and fulfils their clients' human rights.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVIDENCE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1
RECOMMENDATION 1:
BRIEF SEXUALITY-RELATED COMMUNICATION TO PREVENT STIS

RECOMMENDATION 1

BSC is recommended for prevention of STIs among adults and adolescents in primary health services.

Strong recommendation, low to moderate quality of evidence

4.1.1 Background

Adults and adolescents view health-care providers as a trusted source for health information (***49***) and often wish to discuss sexuality-related issues with them (***10***). However, health-care providers tend not to proactively engage their clients about sexual health and well-being (***6***, ***17***). Clients often have to raise the issues themselves, even though they may be embarrassed to do so (***41***, ***44***).

The focus of most sexual health programmes is prevention of unintended pregnancies and prevention and treatment of STIs, and most of the literature on the use of sexual health counselling skills addresses STIs. It demonstrates that provider support can make the difference in enabling clients to prevent STIs (***46***).

However men, women and people living with alternate genders and sexualities across diverse cultures have different perceptions and capacities to prevent STIs, and these may be influenced by a wider range of concerns and problems relating to their own (or their partners') sexual health and well-being, for which they also need health service support (***140***). These may be disease-related problems; for example sexual problems that result from chronic diseases, cancer treatment or diabetes, or STIs (***45***, ***111***); or they may be interpersonal, psychological or social problems (***12***, ***69***). Yet aside from psychologists, sexologists or sex therapists,

health-care providers are often not encouraged or sufficiently trained to feel comfortable in diagnosing these concerns in order to help those who are seeking care (*2*, *44*, *55*, *132*).

People's own perceptions of sexual concerns or problems are quite diverse, subjective and relational in nature and severity. Key dimensions identified as outcome indicators for

Studies described the effects of these improvements in different ways and on different populations, including particularly vulnerable groups. Studies found BSC resulted in: fewer sexual risk behaviours; an increased reported consistency of male condom use (*32*, *85*, *107*

Two studies found that there is no difference in outcomes between BSC interventions and more intensive interventions, both of which had some behavioural dimension (***24***, ***85***), while another showed that individual BSC by a clinician is more effective than peer education (***47***).

Kamb et al. (***85***) found that in addition to the value of the interactive dimension of the conversation between provider and client, including the development of a personalized risk reduction plan played a key role in the effectiveness of BSC (e.g. increased condom use and fewer STIs). Other studies elaborated this; for example Patterson et al. (***114***) described how BSC would identify barriers to implementation and how to overcome them. This included considering potential risks of violence and how to avoid these.

Regarding group interventions, a study in two public STI clinics in New York City that used a 45-minute intervention with groups of 4–8 participants resulted in a 23% reduction in STI incidence over 17 months of follow-up and better attitude, knowledge of condom use and efficacy (***138***). A study in Los Angeles inner-city STI clinics of a waiting room group intervention that compared different types of input – a social influence approach versus a skills approach – found a decrease in STI reinfections among men, but not among women, with both group approaches (***32***). This study led the GDG to conclude that, while group interventions can be effective, one-on-one BSC is more likely to reach a broader range of clients. This view is reinforced by the above-mentioned study of female sex workers in Madagascar comparing peer education alone with peer and health-care provider BSC, where health-care provider counselling produced stronger outcomes regarding reduction in STIs (***47***).

The key study regarding adolescents that supports this recommendation is a study in Washington DC that used the Awareness, Skills, Self-efficacy/Self-esteem, and Social Support (ASSESS) Programme. It advocates "increasing adolescent awareness about sexual risks, skills to avoid risky sexual situations, self-efficacy (such as a feeling that peer pressure can be resisted), and social support (such that adolescents felt encouraged by the physician)" (***17: 109***). It involved an 11-question risk assessment for young adolescents and an audio recording responding to their concerns, followed by health-care provider STI/HIV-prevention counselling and supported with information pamphlets for the adolescents and their parents. After three months, the clients in the intervention group were making greater use of condoms if they had sexual intercourse, but this impact dissipated by nine months. However, self-reported STI outcomes suggested a positive programme impact at nine months, indicating that "the cumulative effect of the increases in adolescent awareness and condom use was a decrease in sexual risk" (***17: 113***).

While BSC takes many forms, in this case the sexual health assessment portion of the audio recording that adolescents listened to at the start of the session asked 11 questions (with response options of "yes", "no" and "does not apply") about feelings and behaviours that may be associated with STI/HIV transmission (including feelings of sexual attraction; history of holding someone in your arms; history of kissing; ability to say no to sexual intercourse; history of masturbation; history of vaginal, oral or anal intercourse; condom use; and use of street drugs or alcohol). The final educational portion of the recording described the possible relationship of each response option to STI or HIV infection risk (***17***). The conversation between provider and client took place

When providers have appropriate training, sexual issues raised by clients can be dealt with in a brief visit to their primary provider, with only more complex issues requiring referral (88). However, sometimes people's sexual health problems (or physiological health problems that are giving rise to sexual difficulties) are beyond the professional capacities of providers at the first level of care. In this context, providers need to know what other services are available and refer clients as necessary. To offer BSC in a context where providers lack the capacity to address certain issues, either directly or through referral, may be suboptimal.

Some studies directly assessed the feasibility of the intervention. A recent study in Russia recruited men and women to receive either a 60-minute motivational/skills building intervention to reduce HIV risk behaviours, or written HIV prevention material alone. With follow-up occurring at three and six months, the intervention group showed a significant decrease in the number of unprotected sexual acts (*84*). The feasibility of BSC in a single session in health-care settings was evaluated in South Africa (*84*), Kenya, Tanzania and Trinidad (*137*), and Mexico (*114*). Results showed that the intervention is feasible within the STI/HIV prevention programmes in low- and middle-income settings, as well as in different cultural contexts.

A study conducted in the United States compared women randomized to a single-session skills-based sexual risk reduction intervention – i.e. a BSC intervention – with women in an AIDS-only education intervention. In this case, almost every patient from the BSC intervention group returned for follow-up assessment at three months, and this group reported significantly higher condom use. BSC was found to be more feasible than group interventions, the method of intervention thought of as more cost-effective (*10*).

Although the above studies found implicit acceptability insofar as clients returned for more sessions, few directly assessed the acceptability of BSC. Some studies questioned its acceptability by patients and health-care providers when it is conducted in couples (*137*), and its acceptability by patients only when it is linked to HIV/STI testing (*84*). However, other studies confirmed the acceptability of the intervention in some populations. In a mixed-method study on the acceptability of BSC for postpartum and breastfeeding women in the United States, the vast majority of women found the assessment to be both acceptable and important (*43*). More studies are needed to evaluate acceptability of the intervention, particularly in low and middle-income countries in order to adapt it to the needs of different populations within the various local contexts.

Because BSC is provided by a health worker, it has greater a likelihood of overcoming cultural sensitivities that exist in many contexts around information dissemination and support for adolescents in relation to sexuality, assuming that the provider has received appropriate training, as discussed in section 4.2. Nevertheless, parents of young adolescents may need reassurance regarding the BSC (*17*).

BSC is but one of the interventions necessary to support adolescents in addressing their sexual health concerns and to reduce STIs and unintended pregnancies. Therefore, BSC should not be chosen in preference over other effective interventions such as comprehensive sexuality education in schools. Moreover, since the evidence shows that not all changes that BSC contributes towards are sustained in the long term, there is a need for continued intervention.

4.2
RECOMMENDATION 2:
TRAINING OF HEALTH-CARE PROVIDERS

RECOMMENDATION 2

Training of health-care providers in sexual health knowledge and the skills of brief sexuality-related communication is recommended.

Strong recommendation, low – very low quality of evidence

4.2.1 Background

Few studies were identified that focused on training health-care providers to address sexuality-related topics with their clients (***2***, ***55***, ***57***, ***77***). Health workers may not recognize signs of sexual health problems; for example, they may focus on the physical symptoms of intimate partner violence while overlooking less obvious ones such as poor mental health (***68***). Discomfort with discussing sexual practices, perceived inadequacy in their skills, discomfort with sexual language, lack of information about treatment options, fear of offending the client, the provider's embarrassment about sexuality, and time constraints have all been identified as important barriers to taking a sexual history and providing counselling (***41***, ***44***, ***49***, ***55***, ***69***, ***110***, ***61***, ***132***). Such discomfort is not necessarily the same for all sexual health issues. For example, one study found that providers found it easier to talk with clients about HIV prevention in general and about the importance of using condoms than about specific sexual risk behaviours or how to talk to a partner about condom use (***41***). One study of general practitioners and nurses reported that they experienced particular barriers with clients who differed from themselves, for example in sexual orientation or gender or ethnicity (***55***, ***73***) or who had intellectual disabilities (***1***). Religion, politics, family dynamics and other factors shape what health-care providers believe and what they do in practise (***66***, ***86***, ***98***).

Studies on sexuality-related issues as diverse as abortion (***65***, ***91***), maternal health (***82***, ***125***) and HIV (***67***, ***135***) have found some health-care providers' negative attitudes to be barriers to care. Similarly, groups that experience social stigma, marginalization or violence on the basis of disability or sexual orientation sometimes have this same experience repeated

with health-care providers, who should be serving them in a supportive and non-judgmental manner (***83, 151***). In addition, gender stereotypes often shape health-care providers' interactions with clients (***115***), and providers' response to adolescents seeking sexual health care can be similarly shaped by their own personal views and experiences (***38***). For all of these reasons, health-care providers' may then promote interventions that are more in keeping with their own beliefs than with the needs and desires of their clients (***37***).

The quality of the client's relationship with the health-care provider influences the subsequent actions that they take (***66, 144***). Once providers have the knowledge and skills to deliver those programmes to their clients, they can help them make enduring changes in their health-related behaviours (***138***).

Increasing clinician's involvement in promoting preventive behaviours can be done with clinician's education and environmental supports (17). Training providers in communication skills improves their level of comfort in dealing with sexual issues (69). Training of service providers in sexuality and sexual health has been demonstrated to be one of the key factors in increasing service use, including adolescents. Interventions such as "values clarification" (103), Health workers for change (72), Stepping stones (148), and Inner spaces outer faces (23) have been shown to make a significant improvement in clients' experience of provider attitudes on socially challenging issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights (66, 87, 76, 145).

Therefore, the need for effective training and preparation of health-care providers is essential for supporting and sustaining behaviour change among clients (***16, 19, 21, 24***). Yet a literature review of medical school curricula across countries found that training in recording sexual histories, assessment of medication for sexual issues, and treatment was "variable, non-standardized, or inadequate" (***110***). A summit of medical school educators and sexual health experts had a similar finding in the United States and Canada (***33***). Finally, specific training on adolescent health is lacking in health-care curricula throughout the world (***133***).

Improving sexuality-related communication depends on investment in training that clarifies and positively influences service providers' values, with intensive follow-up supervision and support (***36***).

GDG experience indicates that training to meet sexual health-related challenges experienced by health-care providers should involve the acquisition of knowledge on those dimensions of sexuality that most frequently arise in a primary health care setting. It also has to build providers' counselling and brief intervention skills. These include active listening with empathy and the ability to ask questions; the capacity for reflexivity, including understanding of their own practice and attitudes towards sexuality; and the ability to conceptualize and optimize their response in ways that are appropriate to the different needs of different clients (***27***).

of the physicians performed client comfort skills; but only 61% acknowledged client discomfort, and even fewer elicited client concerns (***20***). This suggests the importance of interactive training that incorporates skills-building through simulated provider–client interaction (***20***, ***44***, ***138***).

These studies all reinforce the value of supporting providers with a risk-screening tool that prompts them to ensure that the BSC focuses on the specific concerns and context of the client. In the GDG's assessment, the limitation of these studies was their focus on sexually transmitted disease prevention; thus, the provider assessments did not necessarily address broader sexual health concerns. The use of a tool to guide assessment is a key finding, but the GDG proposes that the tool should cover all aspects of sexual health and well-being as defined by WHO. Another component of the provider training that was found effective in these studies was their ability to support clients in developing a personal plan for protecting their sexual health (***44***, ***138***), and this reinforces evidence outlined in earlier sections of this guideline document.

The systematic search did not identify acceptable evidence on what types of pre-service training most successfully build health-care providers' capacity to offer effective BSC. However, GDG's experience indicates that pre-service training provides an opportunity for more systematic knowledge- and skills-building of health-care providers. In addition, lessons learned from studies of what makes in-service training effective could be applied to the pre-service context.

4.2.3 Balance of benefits and harms, feasibility and acceptability

The benefits of the intervention outweigh the harms. However, larger cost-effectiveness studies or investment cases are needed to promote appropriate training modalities, particularly in low- and middle-income countries.

Lack of adequate training undermines health-care providers' competence and confidence in providing sexual health care, including brief sexuality-related communication. Providers who feel inadequate or uncomfortable in addressing sexual health issues, as discussed in the background above, are likely to avoid providing essential services. Discomfort with discussing sexual practices, perceived inadequacy in their skills, discomfort with sexual language, lack of information about treatment options, fear of offending the client, providers' own embarrassment about sexuality, and time constraints have all been identified as important barriers to taking a sexual history and providing counselling (***41***, ***44***, ***49***, ***55***, ***69***, ***78***, ***110***, ***132***). This makes clients vulnerable not only to poor quality care, but also to personal abuse from health-care providers incapable of distinguishing their personal feelings from their professional role. High-quality training can benefit from both the achievement of health service goals and the clients who need providers to recognize and effectively address their sexual health concerns. When balancing the time and resources for BSC training against other priorities, the preventive effects of BSC should be borne in mind.

Several studies evaluated the feasibility of in-service BSC training in health-care providers with no prior counselling skills or minimal training. The duration of the training sessions evaluated in those health-care providers who were not exposed to any prior training ranged from eight hours (*81*) to two weeks (*128*); among those who had basic counselling skills, the range was from two hours (*84*) to three days (*35*). All studies concluded that in-service training is feasible in primary health care settings.

The Bowman study, as explained in the previous section, paired physicians with simulated patients (*20*). The physicians reported that this method of training was acceptable, appealing,

CHAPTER FIVE

PUBLICATION, DISSEMINATION, IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

This guideline document will be published and will be made available in English, French, Spanish and Russian. Depending upon the availability of funds, the book will be also translated into Arabic and Chinese. It will be available and accessible in electronic format through WHO and partner organizations' websites. The synthesis of evidence and recommendations will be published in one or more journal articles and presented at sexual and public health conferences.

It is designed for health policy-makers and decision-makers in health-care professional training institutions. Dissemination will occur through regional and country offices, collaborating centres, professional associations and partner agencies. The implementation process should be based on STI / HIV epidemiology as well as the local context of the epidemic, in line with national STI control and prevention strategies, and it should be inclusive of all national stakeholders. In order to facilitate such an implementation process, a series of the regional introduction and validation workshops are envisaged, if resources allow.

Taking into consideration the sensitivity and complexity of some sexual health constructs, the translation process will be assisted by a technical expert native speaker of one of the official United Nations languages from the GDG or technical partner organization, in order to ensure adequate translation of the main concepts and technical terminology, adapted to local socio-cultural contexts.

Implementation will require a phased approach. The distribution will specifically target health policy-makers and advocates concerned with STIs including HIV and AIDS, such as government, NGOs, donors and civil society and, where they exist, national HIV and AIDS multi-stakeholder working groups. The first phase of implementation will focus on building understanding among these groups of the rationale for, and value of BSC. Once their interest in incorporating BSC is developed, they will consider what policies and practices would need to be changed to guide health-care provider interventions.

Distribution will also target medical and nursing professional associations, as well as lecturers responsible for public health, psychology and STIs in medical and nursing schools. Monitoring would look for processes to engage these persons in assessing existing curricula with a view to ultimately including BSC in training curricula.

CHAPTER SIX

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The limited evidence available for the development of this guideline document indicates that substantially more work needs to be done to study and validate BSC techniques in diverse country and clinical settings and with diverse clients, as well as with diverse providers. Is it more or less effective when delivered by a provider

pay particular attention to a holistic and positive understanding of sexual health, assessing the effectiveness and efficaciousness of BSC on parameters of wellness such as self-esteem, sexual well-being and satisfying relationships, as well as on risk reduction and disease prevention. This would include recovery from violence, bullying and discrimination in diverse populations, including those that are stigmatized in relation to their gender expression or sexuality, those with non-normative sexual orientations, disabled populations, and people living with HIV.

6.2 IN-SERVICE TRAINING OF HEALTH-CARE PROVIDERS

RESEARCH PRIORITY

Immediate testable outputs include health-care providers' capacity to:

- build rapport (and "desensitization" so that their own experiences do not impinge on their response to clients);
- take a history and provide accurate and appropriate information in a non-judgmental and open manner; and
- support clients in creating plans for how they will take steps to promote their sexual health and well-being.

Outcomes to assess include whether the health-care providers' confidence after training correlates with behaviour change in the client, taking into account factors such as client

retention, client adherence, client health and client satisfaction. This research would also test the relationship between length of BSC and the desired outcomes in order to give clearer guidance on the optimal length of time for BSC to result in change. The research would consider the balance between costs and maximum effects and whether there are minimum standards for training.

Nested within this study should be an assessment of the effectiveness of the training modules among diverse providers in a health system.

6.3 ADDRESSING HEALTH SYSTEM AND OPERATIONAL BARRIERS TO BSC IMPLEMENTATION

RESEARCH PRIORITY

Test the implementation of the BSC by trained providers in diverse health-care settings, particularly in resource-poor settings and settings o□ering general health care rather than sexual health care.

The aim would be to identify and understand the dynamics of operational, implementation and health system barriers, as well as factors that enable BSC implementation. The study would assess the additive or synergistic value of including BSC along with more routine preventive services (such as STI testing, provision of condoms and contraception, and vaccination) in primary care settings.

CHAPTER SEVEN

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7.1
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ANNEXES

ANNEX 1
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ANNEX 2
PICO QUESTIONS AND OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK

PICO refers to four elements that should be in a question governing a systematic search of the evidence: population, intervention, comparator and outcomes. The following three PICO questions were identified by the Guideline Development Group as the basis for the systematic review. Each question includes outcomes that were identified and scores rated for each.

Is brief sexuality-related counselling (BSC) as applied to adolescents and adults more effective than the usual standard of care in preventing/addressing:

1.1 sexual difficulties, sexual disease, sexual distress, sexual concerns and sexual misconceptions

1.2 STIs and HIV

1.3 unintended pregnancy and abortion

1.4 sexual violence

1.5 harmful practices

1.6 knowledge increase

HIV = / > 6–12 months follow-up	8.5
Sexual difficulties, disease, distress, concerns, misconceptions, stigma	8.4
Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) = / > 6–12 months follow-up	8.4
Unintended pregnancy/abortion = / > 6–12 months follow-up	8.3
Sexual violence = / > 6–12 months follow-up	7.8
Relationship difficulties, relationship abuse, relationship dissatisfaction	7.7
Knowledge = / > 6–12 months follow-up	6.9
Harmful practices (e.g. female genital mutilation)	5.9

Is BSC as applied to adolescents and adults more effective and encouraging of sexual well-being than no intervention?

Increased safety (condom use, contraceptive use, reduced number of sexual partners)	8.2
Use of preventative services (STI testing, HIV testing, contraceptive demand, vaccinations)	8.2
Increased satisfaction	8.1
Better self-regulation	7.7
Feeling understood or accepted	7.6
Increased connectedness (feeling of being accepted by those around i.e. family, school, peers)	7.6
Increased autonomy	7.6
Higher self-esteem	7.4

Which elements of (sensitization/training) programmes for primary health-care providers increase knowledge and skills on sexuality counselling/communication? (sensitive issues to consider include: abortion, gender-based violence, sexual dysfunction, sexual health, erectile dysfunction, pleasure, fantasies, sexual orientation, gender identity, same sex desire, sexual desire, female genital mutilation).

ANNEX 3
LINKS TO FULL REVIEWS AND EVIDENCE TABLES

PICO 1	STI/HIV	Marrazzo 2011 (95): n=89; Feldblum 2005 (47): n=1000; Patterson 2008 (114): n=924; Cohen 1991 (31): n=192; Cohen 1992 (32): n=903; Warner 2008 (147): n=38,635; Kamb 1998 (85): n=5,758; Metcalf 2005 (100): n=3,297; Orr 1996 (108): n=209; Neumann 2011 (107): n=3,365; James 1998 (80): n=492; Boekeloo 1999 (17): n=219 adolescents; Smith 1997 (130): n=205 adolescents
	Unintended pregnancies	Boekeloo 1999 (17): n=219 adolescents
	Sexual concerns	Boekeloo 1999 (17): n=219 adolescents; Wenger 1992 (149): n=435; Bryan 1996 (22): n=198 adolescents; Orr 1996 (108): n=209
PICO 2	Self-esteem	Bryan 1996 (22): n=198 adolescents
	Efficacy	Bryan 1996 (22): n=198 adolescents; Richardson 2004 (120): n=585; Patterson 2008 (114): n=924; Fisher 2006 (48): n=497, Jemmot 2007 (81): n=564, Kalichman 2011 (84): n=617; Kamb 1998 (85): n=5,758, Rosser 1990 (123): n=159; Langston 2010 (89): n=186; Marrazzo 2012 (95): n=89; Carey 2010 (24): n=1,483; Miller 2011 (102): n=906; Lee 2007 (90): n=166; Proude 2004 (116): n=156; Shlay 2003 (127): n=877; Neumann 2011 (107): n=3,365
PICO	Knowledge, attitudes, skills	Neff 1998 (106): n=423; Fronek 2005 (50): n=89; Bowman 1992 (20): n=232; Thrun 2009 (138): n=182; Dodge 2001 (41): n=1,042; Dreisbach 2011 (42): n=110; Walker 2002 (146): n=125; Bluespruce 2001 (15): n=49; Tepper 1997 (136): n=18
	Use of materials	Boekeloo 1999 (17): n=19; Bowman 1992 (20): n=232; Dodge 2001 (41): n=1,042.

ISBN 978 92 4 154900 4