

'Geography doesn't matter' with sexually transmitted diseases

BY RUTH EPSTEIN
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

SALISBURY — Health care professionals and educators heard updates on the topic of sexually transmitted diseases during the 14th annual Medical Education Event at the Interlaken Inn on Thursday.

Sponsored by the Foundation for Community Health, the event featured speakers from three states to discuss trends and treatments of the diseases: Andrew Sherman Evans Jr. from the Communicable Disease Control and Preparedness Division of the Dutchess County (N.Y.) Department of Behavioral and Community Health; Dr. Lynn Sosa, deputy state epidemiologist with the Connecticut Department of Public Health; and Dr. Katherine Hsu, medical director for the division of STD Prevention & HIV/AIDS Surveillance with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.

Evans said of the top eight notifiable diseases in 2016, four were STDs. Cases of chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis are on the rise, he noted.

"In Dutchess County, we usually follow the national trend," he said.

STDs at one time were predominately seen in large cities, but Evans said people now get them in rural areas, too.

"Geography doesn't matter anymore," he said. "We are seeing cases out in this part of the county."

Chlamydia is the most reported disease in Dutchess County and gonorrhea is a huge problem, Evans said. There is a disparate rate of early syphilis in the African-American and Hispanic population, with a decline in cases involving young people, but an increase for those who are older, he said.

"What is alarming is that we're seeing more and more females getting early syphilis," Evans said.



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The Foundation for Community Health's 14th annual Medical Education Event was held Thursday at the Interlaken Inn in Salisbury. From left, Gertrude O'Sullivan, the foundation's director of communications and special programs; Nancy Heaton, the foundation's executive director; Andrew Evans Jr. of the Dutchess (N.Y.) County Department of Behavioral and Community Health; Dr. Lynn Sosa of the Connecticut Department of Health and Dr. Katherine Hsu of the Massachusetts Department of Health.

Sadly, more cases of congenital syphilis, which affects babies, are being seen and it is completely prevent-

able, he noted.

Unlike New York, Connecticut does not have county-level health departments, Sosa said. Since 2000, syphilis has been a problem in Connecticut mostly among men, but it's also on the rise for women and in babies.

"To me, the biggest enigma is gonorrhea," Sosa said, noting she can't explain the fluctuation rates. "Something is going on with gonorrhea in Connecticut."

As for chlamydia, after seeing a decrease in adolescents, there is now a huge increase because of more testing, she noted.

Sosa provided some figures for Litchfield County, saying in the past three years, there have been a few cases of syphilis and chlamydia, mostly among women in their early 20s.

"It doesn't matter who you are or where you are — if you have sex, you can get infected," Sosa said.

Hsu posed a question to the audience about what

happened in the 1990s to cause a decrease in STDs. She agreed when they said HIV was in the forefront and there was a great deal of education on the disease. People were scared STDs could be deadly. Now aware they don't kill, people are more likely to be involved in risky behavior, she said.

She said while medication can be used to treat the diseases, it's harder to change personal behavior.

"Sex should be fun, so people go without condoms because it's more pleasurable," Hsu said.

The Foundation for Community Health is a private, not-for-profit philanthropic organization formed to maintain and improve the physical and mental health of area residents historically served by Sharon Hospital, with an emphasis on serving the most vulnerable.

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