



# Western Australian Syphilis Outbreak Response Group Communique Report – March 2021

<b>Security</b>	For the Working Group – In confidence
<b>Target audience</b>	Syphilis Outbreak Response Stakeholders; WA SORG, clinicians
<b>Communique no.</b>	8
<b>Reporting Data</b>	As of 31 December 2020 (current status)

## The WA Syphilis Outbreak Response Group (WA SORG)

The WA SORG is responsible for coordinating a statewide response to the increasing notifications of infectious syphilis that are being experienced in WA. The WA SORG reports to the WA Chief Health Officer, with regular briefings provided to the national Multijurisdictional Syphilis Outbreak Working Group, and the national Enhanced Response Addressing Sexually Transmissible Infections (and Blood Borne Viruses) in Indigenous Populations Governance Group (the Governance Group). The WA SORG encompasses the Kimberley, Pilbara, Goldfields, South West and Perth Metropolitan regions.

This communique provides a quarterly update of the WA syphilis outbreak response; the previous Communique (no. 7) was made available in December 2020.

## Current status

The outbreak data for affected regions in WA to 31 December 2020 are shown in Figure 1 and Table 1.

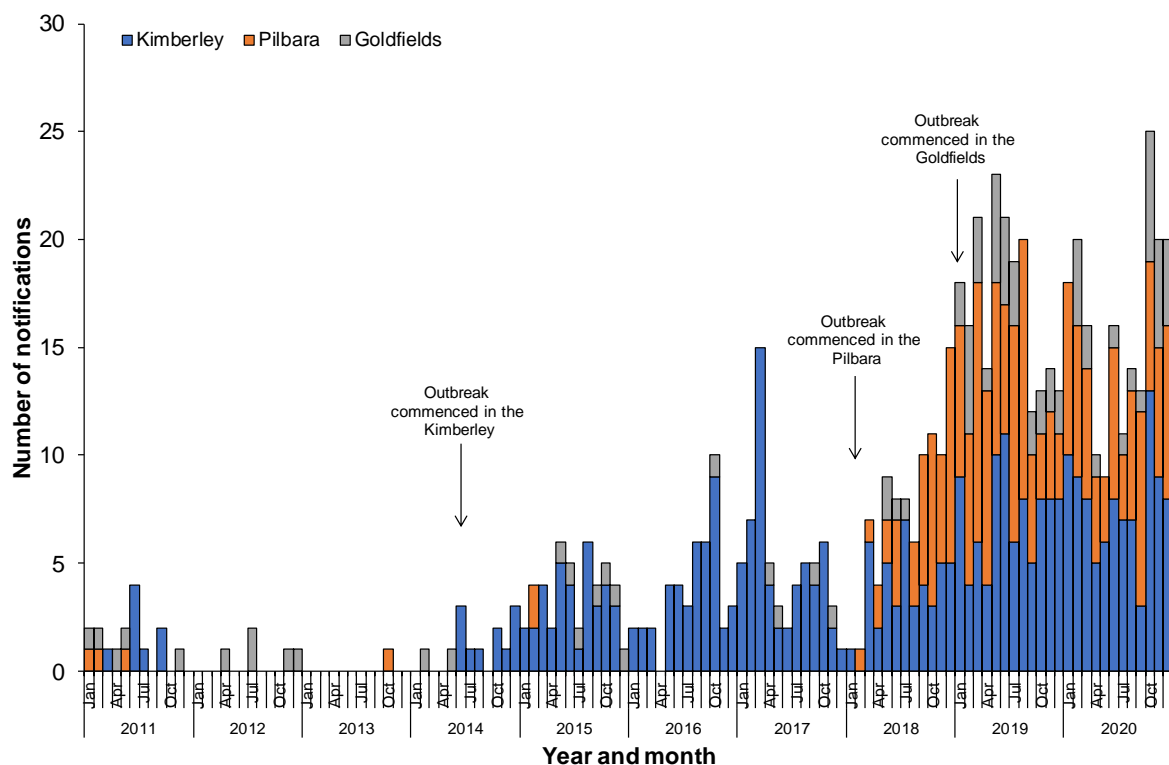


Figure 1. Epidemic curve showing the number of infectious syphilis notifications among Aboriginal people in affected regions in WA (Kimberley, Pilbara and Goldfields), from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2020.

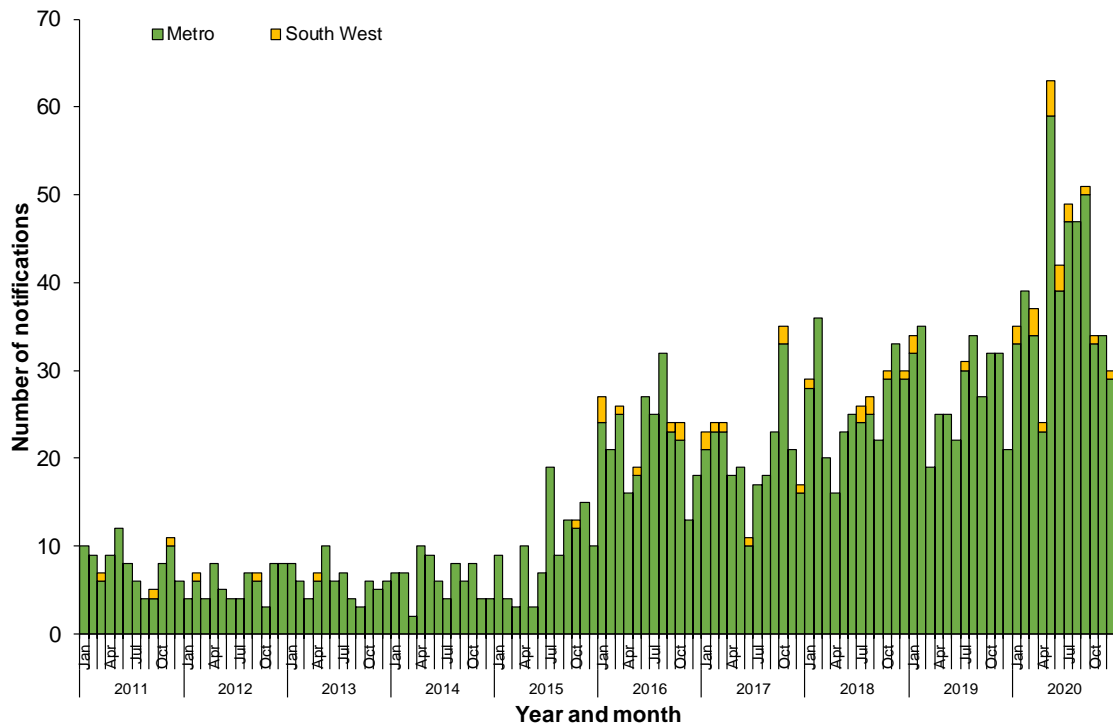


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**Table 1.** Characteristics of outbreak cases of infectious syphilis notified in regions of Western Australia, from 1 June 2014 to 31 December 2020<sup>1</sup>.

	Kimberley	Pilbara	Goldfields	Total
<b>Characteristics</b>				
Outbreak commencement	Jun 2014	Feb 2018	Jan 2019	Jun 2014
Cases <sup>2</sup> last quarter: Jul to Sep 2020	17	18	3	38
Cases this quarter: Oct to Dec 2020	30	20	15	65
Total number of cases (since outbreak commencement)	371	201	57	629
<b>Number of cases reported by specified age group (%)*</b>				
15-19 yrs	89 (24%)	59 (29%)	8 (14%)	156 (25%)
20-24 yrs	95 (26%)	38 (19%)	9 (16%)	142 (23%)
25-29 yrs	54 (15%)	32 (16%)	17 (30%)	103 (16%)
30-34 yrs	43 (12%)	29 (14%)	8 (14%)	80 (13%)
<b>% Cases reported by sex</b>				
Male	156 (42%)	91 (45%)	25 (44%)	272 (43%)
Female	215 (58%)	110 (55%)	32 (56%)	357 (57%)
<b>Congenital cases</b>				
Congenital cases, confirmed (probable)	0 (0)	1 (0)	0 (0)	1 (0)
Number of deaths in congenital cases	0	0	0	0

\* Not all age groups included



**Figure 2.** Epidemic curve showing the number of infectious syphilis notifications among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the metropolitan and South West regions of WA, from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2020.

<sup>1</sup> Please note that all data are provisional and subject to change due to ongoing case investigation.



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**Table 2.** Characteristics of infectious syphilis cases notified in the metropolitan and South West regions of WA, from 1 June 2014 to 31 December 2020.

	<b>Metro</b>	<b>South West</b>
<b>Characteristics</b>		
Cases <sup>2</sup> last quarter: Jul to Sep 2020	144	3
Cases this quarter: Oct to Dec 2020	96	2
Total number of cases (since June 2014)	1,771	45
<b>Aboriginality</b>		
Aboriginal	128 (7%)	7 (16%)
non-Aboriginal	1,643 (93%)	38 (84%)
<b>Number of cases reported by specified age group (%)*</b>		
15-19 yrs	57 (3%)	7 (16%)
20-24 yrs	211 (12%)	7 (16%)
25-29 yrs	332 (19%)	5 (11%)
30-34 yrs	324 (18%)	6 (13%)
35-39 yrs	246 (14%)	5 (11%)
40-44 yrs	202 (11%)	3 (7%)
<b>% Cases reported by sex</b>		
Male	1,557 (88%)	32 (71%)
Female	204 (12%)	13 (29%)
Transgender	10 (1%)	0 (0%)
<b>Exposure category</b>		
MSM	1,197 (68%)	17 (38%)
Heterosexual	488 (28%)	26 (58%)
Unknown	86 (5%)	2 (4%)
<b>Congenital cases</b>		
Congenital cases, confirmed (probable)	3 (1)	0 (0)
Number of deaths in congenital cases	1	0

## Governance Update

### WA SORG

- The WA SORG meets on a quarterly basis and the last meeting was on 9 March 2021.
- The *WA Syphilis Outbreak Response Action Plan Annual Report 2019-20* has been completed and includes a progress report against the Monitoring Framework. The report will be available on the WA Syphilis Outbreak Response [site](#).
- A metropolitan specific Action Plan has been developed to provide an overview of required strategies for the metropolitan syphilis response.
- The membership in the Terms of Reference has been reviewed and now includes representatives from all seven WA Country Health Service regions as well as the Perth metropolitan area.
- There have been a number of changes to the WA SORG working groups. A metropolitan specific Prevention, Education and Community Engagement working group has been established.
- The Antenatal and Postnatal and Surveillance and Reporting working groups have been reactivated to discuss state-wide activities and actions.



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**Table 3.** *WA Syphilis Outbreak Response Action Plan* key priority area activity updates.

<b>Priority Area 1: Prevention, education and community engagement</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Sexual Health and Blood-borne Virus Program has recently produced the Toolkit for the use of Social Media in the WA Sexual Health and Blood-borne Viruses Sector under the guidance of a small working group.</li><li>• A range of educational and promotional activities were implemented in February as part of Sexual Health Week and National Condom Day.</li><li>• The 'Test More' campaign for 15-29 year olds is being rolled out in the Kimberley.</li><li>• There has been a state-wide digital campaign produced by the Communicable Disease Control Directorate. The 'Let your partners know' campaign is aiming to promote contact tracing within communities.</li><li>• The South West is implementing community engagement and condom distribution initiatives.</li></ul>
<b>Priority Area 2: Workforce development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The syphilis videoconference series is ongoing. The most recent session covered Community Based Sexual Health Education. The next presentation is scheduled for 31 March and will focus on surveillance and reporting.</li><li>• The Sexual Health Orientation Manual for Endemic Regions has been updated and will be available in late March.</li><li>• Work has commenced for an ASHM online learning module specific for midwives. A reference group has been established to offer input and feedback on the content.</li></ul>
<b>Priority Area 3: Testing, treatment and contact tracing</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• All 24 placements within the syphilis point-of-care testing program have been allocated. Services are continuing to be trained and work is being done to cement point-of-care testing into patient flow and service delivery.</li><li>• The Goldfields region are developing a Step by Step Syphilis Guide for local Public Health Teams.</li><li>• The syphilis quick guide is currently being reviewed due to recent changes to antenatal testing guidelines.</li><li>• A multi-disciplinary group has begun meeting fortnightly in the Perth metropolitan area to address patient management of pregnant women with syphilis and another group is focussing on complex patient management in people experiencing homelessness.</li></ul>
<b>Priority Area 4: Surveillance and reporting</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Department of Health has finalised a syphilis point-of-care testing dashboard to capture and display data at the state-wide level.</li><li>• The Syphilis Enhanced Surveillance Form is being updated.</li><li>• Monthly syphilis alerts are being distributed in the Kimberley for health practitioners.</li></ul>
<b>Priority Area 5: Antenatal and postnatal care</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The baby baskets program is ongoing in the Goldfields and Pilbara.</li><li>• Syphilis testing guidelines for antenatal women in WA have changed to a universal 3 tests; at first antenatal visit, 28 weeks and 36 weeks or at delivery in the event of a preterm baby. The 5 test guidelines for regions affected by the ongoing outbreak in Aboriginal communities in regional northern and central Australia remain in place; in WA these regions are the Kimberley, Goldfields and Pilbara.</li></ul>

**Prepared by:**

WA Syphilis Outbreak Response Group  
March 2021

Further information relating to the WA SORG available on the WA SORG webpage:  
[https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/U\\_Z/WA-Syphilis-outbreak-response](https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/U_Z/WA-Syphilis-outbreak-response)