

Seminar

on Thursday February 11th 2016, 16:00 (seminar room 606, 1st floor)

Sex and statistics: What probability surveys can (and can't) tell us about a nation's bedroom secrets

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The emergence of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s somewhat legitimised the scientific study of sexual behaviour. Since then, representative data on sexual behaviour have come to be recognised as essential for understanding and informing sexual health policy and practice beyond HIV/AIDS prevention. In Britain, we are fortunate to have had 3 decennial national probability sample surveys to date, the National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles – or ‘Natsal’ for short (www.natsal.ac.uk). With data collected from >46,000 people since the first survey was undertaken in 1990, we are able to track the sexual lifestyles of successive British birth cohorts back to the 1930s and so consider both cohort and period effects. However, Natsal is far from perfect and while there is much that we can say about the nation’s bedroom secrets, there is much that we can not. My seminar will discuss these strengths and weaknesses, including reflecting on the methodological challenges that surveys like Natsal are increasingly facing, including declining survey response rates, and the difficulty of reaching population groups of greatest interest to epidemiologists.



Catherine Mercer, a statistician and demographer by training, has been working in epidemiology and public health, specifically in the context of sexual health, since 2000. In that time she has secured >£20M of competitive grant funding and published >140 peer-reviewed articles, many of which from Britain’s National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal; www.natsal.ac.uk), which she now co-leads in addition to one of three themes for England’s National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Health Protection Research Unit (HPRU) in Blood-borne and Sexually Transmitted Infections (<http://bbsti.hpru.nihr.ac.uk/>). Her HPRU theme aims to improve understanding and the knowledge-base of the behaviours, attitudes, and factors that influence the risk of STI and BBV acquisition and transmission in key population groups to inform the development of novel interventions and support the targeting and delivery of timely interventions. This focus is very much at the heart of Cath’s research: providing sound evidence upon which to inform health policy and practice in order to maximise individual and public health benefit.

Organisation:

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