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Bill would cut reinfection of STDs, health risks

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By Maura Possley, Staff Writer

Not a week goes by that Dr. Matthew Johnson doesn't treat a patient in his Park Forest office for a reinfected sexually transmitted disease.

The sexual partner of a patient skips seeking treatment of his or her own, and his patient comes in infected again.

It's a revolving door for diseases like gonorrhea and chlamydia that health care providers have tried to slow for years.

And as infection rates have risen in Cook County, which in 2007 claimed the undistinguished title of the highest number of gonorrhea cases and second highest chlamydia cases in the country, the mission is more urgent than ever.

"Untreated sexually transmitted diseases are an epidemic," said John Peller, director of government relations for the AIDS Foundation of Chicago. "We know most of the time the partner never gets the treatment. They can be easily and simply treated."

A bill to stem this tide of reinfection backed by the foundation and a number of health care provider groups is on Gov. Pat Quinn's desk for signature in the coming weeks.

It allows for expedited partner therapy, a tool that sends infected patients home with a dose of antibiotics for their partner - enough to treat gonorrhea or chlamydia, Peller said.

Fifteen states currently allow the therapy, he said, and the Centers for Disease Control has recommended it to better treat gonorrhea and chlamydia.

While not a cure, the therapy is predicted to cut the number of reinfection by 20 percent to 46 percent, according to the CDC.

"It's not going to be a magic bullet, that suddenly every STD in Illinois is going to be cured," Peller said. "But we know the traditional way of saying, 'Get your partner in here,' doesn't work."

That's what doctors rely on today to treat partners, and advocates say in half of those cases partners don't follow doctors' orders.

"It leaves me with the desire to want to offer some kind of treatment for that (partner)," said Johnson, of Park Forest Family Practice. "But in the real world you can't just write prescriptions for someone you've never seen before."

Illinois Trial Lawyers Association has said the bill will protect providers from malpractice claims that doctors might otherwise face dispensing prescriptions to patients they haven't examined.

If made law, the state Public Health Department would work with advocacy groups and providers to draft information for patients. Whether a patient should get a dose for his or her partner would largely come down to a doctor's discretion, Johnson said.

In some cases patients would leave a doctor's office with medicine in hand for their partner, sometimes they'd get a prescription to be filled at a pharmacy and sometimes patients could get their prescriptions filled for free by a public health agency.

Though questions were raised about doctors giving medications for sexually transmitted diseases to teenagers - the age group among which these diseases are most common - advocates said already teens consent to STD testing and treatment, so this law would be nothing new.

Ultimately, the bill is focused on the health risks posed by diseases like gonorrhea and chlamydia.

Women in particular are in danger. Letting the diseases go untreated leads to everything from pelvic

inflammatory disease to ectopic pregnancies and infertility.

"It would give us so many more healthy people," said Pam Sutherland, vice president for public policy for Planned Parenthood. "If this stuff does go untreated and a woman does suffer from pelvic inflammatory disease, that can cost \$1,000 compared with \$2.50 in antibiotics."

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