

Summer Studentships 2026/2027

PROJECT TITLE:

Optimising a sexual health helpline: a qualitative investigation of service awareness, acceptability and delivery preferences.

AIM:

This project provides an opportunity for a summer student to contribute to a stand-alone, qualitative sexual health research project designed with a direct path to impact. The research aims to explore young people's perspectives on an existing sexual health helpline to inform re-design of the service, with the goal of improving service awareness, acceptability and engagement.

METHODS:

The Sexually Transmitted Infections Education Foundation (STIEF) is a New Zealand consumer-focused organisation that provides evidence-informed sexual health information, education and support, including a free national helpline service. This study will inform a planned 2027 re-design and modernisation of STIEF's helpline service by drawing on the perspectives of potential service users, particularly young people. Meaningful engagement with service users is a critical component of effective service design so is the key focus of this project.

The project will begin by engaging with STIEF team members (inclusive of a youth advisory group) to inform data collection and recruitment approaches. The student will lead recruitment of up to 20 young people from diverse demographic backgrounds to participate in one of 3-5 small online focus groups. Focus group discussion will centre around identifying ways to improve service awareness, understanding key factors (individual, social and structural) impacting on acceptability and accessibility and preferred modes of engagement. The student will co-facilitate discussions with support from supervisors or STIEF team members and transcribe conversations (using University-approved AI software). They will undertake analysis with support from supervisors underpinned by an appropriate theoretical framework (e.g. Health Care Utilisation model, or Theory of planned behaviour). The student will draft a report for STIEF and a paper for publication.

RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE:

Young people, particularly young women, experience a disproportionately high burden of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in New Zealand, with infections such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea and herpes continuing to disproportionately impact on people aged 15–29 years. Undetected and untreated STIs can lead to serious long-term reproductive health consequences for women, including pelvic inflammatory disease, infertility, ectopic pregnancy, and increased vulnerability to other infections. They can also have significant psychosocial impacts, including stigma, shame and anxiety and contribute to relationship difficulties.

Despite the elevated burden, youth engagement with sexual health services remains suboptimal - reflecting a persistent gap between need and service utilisation. Barriers such as stigma, embarrassment, low awareness of available services, and confidentiality concerns are well known and continue to limit help-seeking. Barrier-free access to information, testing and treatment for all people contributes to reductions in STI prevalence. In turn, this reduces STI incidence and related risk of downstream reproductive complications for women.

[STIEF](#) provides evidence-informed information, education and support through a range of resources, three websites (Herpes, HPV and Just the Facts) and related social media accounts, as well as a free nurse counsellor-operated helpline. Despite a known need for free sexual health services, the helpline service is currently predominantly

accessed by women aged 30-50 years, with very low rates of utilisation by younger age groups who are most impacted by STIs. The helpline was initially designed to support people receiving a diagnosis of HPV or herpes. As part of their 2027 work plan, STIEF plan to widen the scope of the service to be inclusive of all STIs. This project has been specifically designed to help inform STIEF's service refresh.

There is evidence that young people are willing to engage with helplines that offer accessible, confidential, non-judgemental advice across a choice of communication channels (eg. calls, text, webchat, WhatsApp) - Youthline has over a quarter of a million annual contacts by young people in New Zealand. This suggests that while helplines are a potentially well-aligned model for delivering sexual health support to younger populations, utilisation may be limited by how services are designed, delivered and promoted. This project will address this evidence gap by engaging with young people to understand their perspectives on the sexual health helpline, and by identifying effective ways to reach and engage with people who may benefit from this service.

STUDENT'S ROLE AND EXPOSURE TO SCIENTIFIC METHOD:

The student will have a core role within a small research team and will gain hands-on experience across all stages of the research process, including input into participant recruitment approaches, data collection, analysis and reporting.

The student will review and summarise relevant literature and build qualitative research skills. They will facilitate small online focus groups, lead analysis and interpretation within a theoretical framework, and contribute to written outputs for dissemination (a report and a publication).

Importantly, the project has a strong applied focus, with findings directly informing the re-design and modernisation of an existing sexual health service, giving the student valuable insight into how research evidence can be translated into real-world impact.

RELEVANT PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE FOR STUDENTS (Education or Research):

The student will ideally have an interest in women's health, sexual health, youth health, and health service delivery.

- The role requires strong communication and interpersonal skills, particularly for engaging sensitively with young people and collaborating with STIEF staff, and advisory group members.
- Excellent organisational, time management, and writing skills will be essential to ensure timely completion of the project within 10 weeks.
- Professionalism and the ability to handle confidential information appropriately are also important.
- A basic understanding of research methods is desirable, and a willingness to learn qualitative data collection and analysis methods.

Main supervisor:	Dr Sally Rose, Senior research fellow, Dept Primary Health Care, University of Otago Wellington	
Email address:	sally.rose@otago.ac.nz	
Other Supervisor/s:	Dr Hayley Denison, Senior research officer, Centre for Public Health Research, Massey University, STIEF board chair H.Denison@massey.ac.nz	
Host Department:	Primary Health Care, Faculty of Medicine, University of Otago Wellington	
Location:	Wellington campus	
	Can students work remotely?	Yes