

GetCheckedOnline Ontario?: Exploring Digital STI Testing in a Context of Political-Economic Complexity

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Background & Context

- www.GetCheckedOnline.com (GCO) is a digital sexually transmitted infections (STI) testing service available in select regions in British Columbia (BC). See virtual CAHR: EPH2.07
- Digital STI testing has been shown to mitigate testing access barriers for gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (GBM) ([Knight et al., 2017; 2019](#)).
- We studied the potential expansion of digital STI testing in Ontario, focusing on meeting the testing needs of GBM in a new provincial context.
- In 2019 the Ontario provincial government announced cuts of ~\$1B to Toronto Public Health ([CBC News April 18, 2019](#)).
- Austerity - the practice of reducing the welfare state - is a “political choice” that contributes to poor health and service constraints ([Viens 2019, p. 149](#)).
- All STI testing conducted in Ontario is regulated by the *Laboratory & Specimen Collection Centre Licensing Act*.

Methods: Institutional Ethnography

- Explicating text-mediated work practices ([Smith 2005](#))
- Charting the context and ruling relations ([Smith 2007](#))
- Rich history in critical HIV research (e.g., [Smith 1990](#); [Grace 2015](#); [2019](#))

Data Collection & Analysis (June 2019-March 2020)

- 22 key stakeholders with expertise in STI testing and GBM sexual health were interviewed (e.g., public health physicians, nurses, program managers)
- 3 pertinent stakeholder meetings were observed
- Textual analysis (e.g., *Laboratory & Specimen Collection Centre Licensing Act*)
- All data were coded using NVivo and analyzed iteratively



Results	Stakeholder excerpts
<p>1. Local legislation shapes and constrains the digital testing landscape</p>	<p><i>“[name of Ontario city] Public Health did have a – it wasn’t GetCheckedOnline – but it was a similar service where people could go onto their website and download lab requisitions and then take it to a lab and get tested... The Province sent out a letter to all the health units saying that this form of lab testing was not allowed under the Lab Services Act [LCCSA] in Ontario... I thought it [digital testing] was a really innovative approach... But then this letter came out from the Ministry. Basically telling health units that... they’d have to cease and desist...”</i></p> <p>-Associate Medical Officer of Health, public health unit</p>
<p>2. Testing service innovation and expansion is sensitive to changes in local political leadership</p>	<p><i>“We were ... expanding it [former digital STI testing service] ... when the Province came in and told us that we were no longer able to do it... We were being contacted by other health units throughout the province who were interested in launching an online STI testing vehicle as well. And that's when the Province kind of ... got wind of it - but they already knew — it was a change in leadership”</i></p> <p>-Program Manager, public health unit</p>
<p>3. Logics of austerity direct the building of a “business case” to innovate STI testing</p>	<p><i>“So I think also from a health economics point of view, particularly in the context of our current provincial government -which is all about savings - I think you can also build a business case. Like, this is actually more efficient and it’s for guys who may be at higher risk for STIs... You can actually say that this is a more efficient way of using health care dollars.”</i></p> <p>-Executive Director, community sexual health centre</p>
	<p><i>“The reasons that we would want to make legislative change are, first of all, based on burden of disease...And I would also want to know that there is specific benefit to this kind of intervention. So would people who wouldn’t access testing in other ways, access online testing?... And then to my secondary consideration would be, could costs be saved?”</i></p> <p>-public health physician, government public health organization</p>

Results & Conclusion

- **Local legislation and political factors direct the work of expanding *GCO*, or a similar digital testing service, into a new provincial context.**
- **The *Laboratory & Specimen Collection Centre Licensing Act* was identified as the main legislation limiting the opportunity for digital STI testing in Ontario.**
- **Stakeholders recommended that if evidence of *best practice* together with health economics analyses indicate potential cost savings, a *business case* strategy could be leveraged to gain the support of decision makers.**
- **Political context and logics of austerity shape the availability of health services, such as digital STI testing, intended to improve GBM's sexual health.**