



Options to Impact!

A report on Options for Sexual Health's clinical services

Our Mission

To champion and celebrate the sexual health of all people of BC by supporting, providing, and promoting inclusive and accessible health care and education.

Our Vision

To be trusted and innovative leaders in a world that honours sexuality and its diversity.

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Who we are

Options for Sexual Health (Options) is Canada's largest non-profit provider of sexual health services through clinics, education programs, and Sex Sense, our information and referral line.

At Options we care about the healthy sexuality of all British Columbians. We offer sexual and reproductive health care, information, and education from a feminist, pro-choice, sex positive perspective.

Option's mission is to champion and celebrate the sexual health of all people in BC by supporting, providing, and promoting inclusive and accessible health care and education. Option is proud to serve people of all ages, all genders, and all orientations.

Option for Sexual Health's clinical services

Options operates 58 sexual health clinics in BC, including satellites, affiliates, and service sites.

Specially certified nurses supervise our clinics, with clinical and medical support from physicians, and patient support from volunteers. Last year, Options clinics served over 23,000 patients, providing the clinical care they needed to support their sexual wellness.

Our clinics provide non-judgmental birth control counselling and low cost contraceptives and supplies, sexually transmitted infection (STI) and Pap testing, pregnancy testing and options counselling, and general sexual health information and referrals.

Our intended impacts

Patients are in control of their fertility

Patients are aware of all contraceptive methods and have access to the method that works for them when they want it.

Patients are committed to optimal sexual health

Patients are informed and advocate for their sexual health with their partners and their health care providers, and take advantage of all testing, screening, and treatment options available to them.

Patients are empowered in their sexual expression

Sexual health is not just limited to the absence of disease, but also includes pleasure and wellbeing. Patients are free to explore and celebrate their sexuality without fear, shame, stigma, or threat. Their sexual encounters are consensual and pleasurable.

Methodology

The aim of our evaluation was to see what kind and quality of impact we are having through our clinical services. Over the course of the project, we (a) developed and refined our ideas of intended impact and indicators, (b) designed and implemented both qualitative and quantitative means to collect and analyze data, and (c) identified findings and considered the implications to those findings for program adjustments.

This project began with a focus on the work of identifying and clarifying the intended impact of our clinical services. Once the ideas had been developed, and indicators had been identified, we then designed a questionnaire to collect data about quantitative measures and a qualitative interview protocol to collect qualitative data. The preliminary data were analyzed, and themes were identified and then translated into findings. From the findings, we developed program responses and recommendations for change.

Qualitative Data and Analysis

For the qualitative portion of the evaluation, we designed an in-depth interview protocol to gain data about the qualitative changes resulting from our clinical services. We identified a sample of patients using a purposeful stratified technique to select a representation of the population we served. We limited our sample to our Vancouver and Kootenay Loop Options clinics, with plans to expand this inquiry to other clinics as we perfect our techniques. We drew our sample from the following strata of our population: returning patients, between the ages of 16-39, who attended the clinic for birth control counseling, STI testing, and/or IUD insertion.

We then arranged one-on-one interviews lasting from between 45 minutes and one hour in length. Twelve patients were interviewed. Data were collected and we applied a four-step model of textual analysis to each of the interviews. This process allowed us to interpret the meaning and significance of the interview data. We then examined the overarching themes that emerged from the full scope of our data analysis to illuminate the primary insights and discoveries.

Quantitative Data and Analysis

For the quantitative portion of the evaluation, we designed a questionnaire to collect data on our quantitative indicators of impact. We administered this instrument to Vancouver and Kootenay Loop patients; 43 surveys were completed. The data were analyzed primarily using measures of central tendency.

Our evaluation produced preliminary findings that capture the primary discoveries from the data. The most significant findings are described in the following narrative.

Findings

TRUST IN OPTIONS FOR SEXUAL HEALTH

At Options, patients trust the information provided by our clinicians, and they trust that their experience at our clinics will be patient centered, pro-choice, and non-judgmental. In our interviews, patients mentioned that they came to Options because they knew they would receive current, unbiased, and non-judgmental care, and that they would be able to ask questions they do not feel comfortable asking elsewhere. For many, their visit to Options is the first time they experience patient centered care. The impact of a trusting relationship with their care provider and trusting the efficacy of their contraception can transform their sexuality and health, as well as their view of and experience in relationships. Several patients describe being more committed to their health, comfortable in their sexual expression, and committed to others' wellbeing.

One patient said:

The stigma around STI testing being scary or weird is gone. STI testing is simple and easy (and fun). I have developed comfort and confidence. I want family and friends to get tested and tell them how easy and comfortable it is to get it done.

Another patient said:

Options for Sexual Health is a good safe place to ask questions. I am committed to my sexual wellbeing and standing up for myself.

Another patient said:

Options for Sexual Health is a reliable place to get birth control and STI testing—I know I can trust you, and you know what you're talking about!

Significance: It is evident from our discussions with patients that they sought care from Options for Sexual Health because of our reputation as inclusive, non-judgmental, pro-choice, sexual health experts. They trust Options with their care, which allows them to accept the information provided, which in turn reduces shame, anxiety, and discomfort. Receiving the care they feel they deserve leaves

them empowered to be responsible for their health and accessing health care services when they need to. Trusting their contraceptive method allows them to experience more pleasure and intimacy, impacting their overall wellbeing.

Possible recommendations: Emphasize the trust placed in Options in our recruitment and onboarding process for staff, specifically the significant impact that access to our inclusive, non-judgmental, pro-choice, sexual health experts has on our patients' quality of life.

WE'RE THE SEXPERTS

At Options, our clinicians' specialized expertise results in improved sexual health outcomes. This may be in contrast to the type of care patients have experienced with General Practitioners (GPs) or at walk-in clinics where sexual health may not be the clinician's focus. This access to specialized, targeted care has a direct impact on patient health, the contraceptive options they are able to choose, the increased comfort in accessing sexual health services and improved understanding of STIs, regular testing, and risks.

One patient said:

The doctor was really helpful. I was nervous because most doctors recommend [the IUD] to people who have already had children. That it is even an option for me is great. Before I found this method, contraception was like an obsession. Now I feel more comfortable being sexual. I have experiences I hesitated having before. Being open about it increased my confidence, to know that those opportunities are available to me.

Another patient said:

I am very afraid of the needle and the women [at Options] are really compassionate and now I am less apprehensive about testing. It is not something to fear or be concerned about.

Another patient said:

The nurse calmed me down and helped me understand Pap results. I had an emotional reaction to the Pap results because of misinformation but was supported at Options.

However, the clinical care Options provides does not necessarily translate into improved understanding and empowerment around more complex health concerns, or comfort and knowledge about pleasure and their sexual expression.

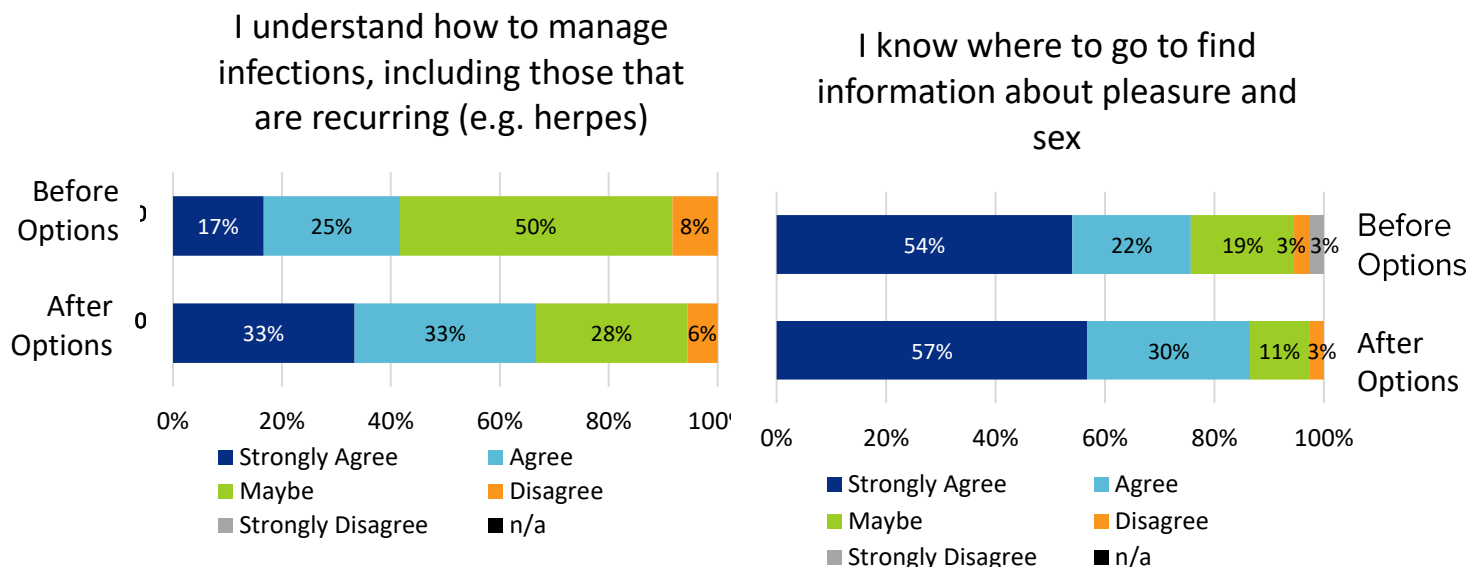
One patient said:

I didn't get a lot of information from Options. I want to learn more about herpes so I can deal with it effectively. I am worried about finding a partner.

Another patient said:

Coming to Options did not change my beliefs or impact my sexuality.

These sentiments are supported by the quantitative survey, where new patients often come in with low understanding of how to manage infections. While there is a substantial increase in understanding after their visit, it is still low relative to other health areas. With respect to pleasure, there is only a small increase in understanding, importance, or experience as a result of coming to Options.



Significance: Options Clinical Services program is highly effective at leveraging the sexual health expertise of our clinical staff in impacting patient health care outcomes. The program is less effective at resourcing patients regarding their sexuality and pleasure. This is not surprising. Pleasure is not an area of primary expertise for our clinicians, our clinics are under resourced, and the primary concern for our clinicians is addressing the clinical needs of our patients.

Possible recommendations: Complementary programs focusing on pleasure—led by educators—could address these impact areas.

IN THE KNOW

When someone visits an Options clinic they have the opportunity to learn more about sexual health and sexuality. Through our interviews, the impact that acquisition of knowledge has on our patients became clear. Many of the patients interviewed reported that they learned new information when they attended the clinic that not only increased their knowledge, but also increased their confidence about their own sexual health, bodies, and relationships. Many of our patients reported that there is a direct link between having knowledge and becoming more confident. In many cases, patients talked about the acquisition of the information changing how they felt about their decisions; having more information empowered them to make choices for themselves in a way that was not accessible to them before. Several patients mentioned that this was information they had not had access to anywhere else in their lives, such as at school or with other clinicians. Patients also talked about knowledge gaps they currently have pertaining to sexual health, and their ability to gain that knowledge through their future visits to the Options clinics.

Patients talked about the differences they experienced in other clinics or areas of their lives and how at Options asking questions and talking about sex was available to them.

One patient said:

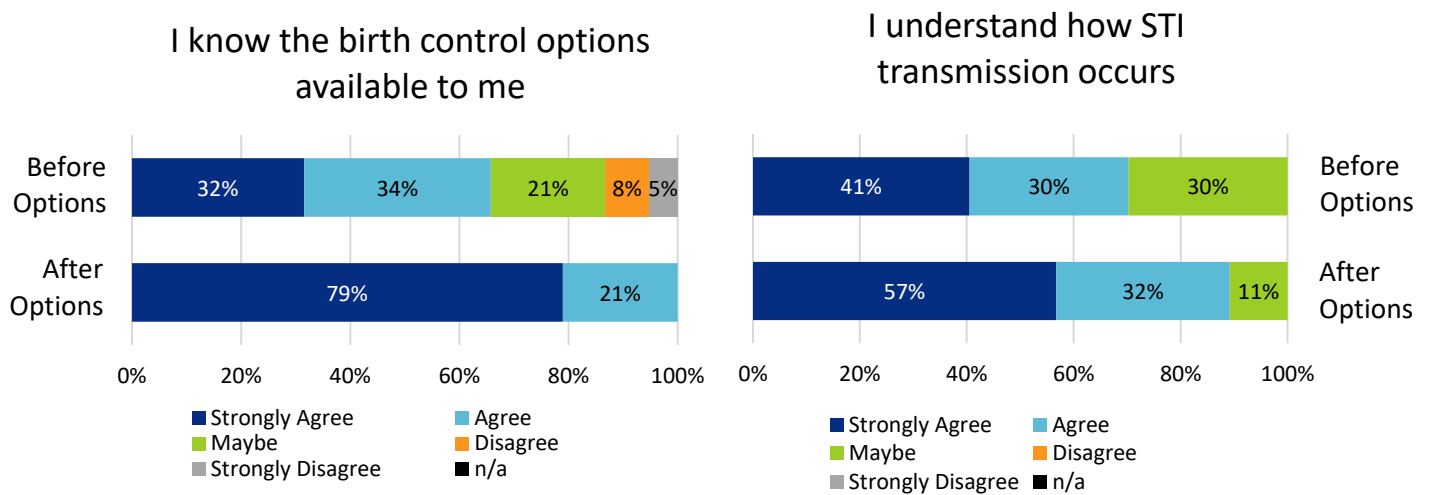
Before it felt very hush-hush, but you are very open, so if there was an issue about my sexuality, I know you are a resource that I can go to if I have any questions.

Another patient said:

If I have any questions or concerns, I know how easy it is to go to [an Options clinic] and how nice the clinic is.

Another patient said:

[I feel] more confident. At this point in my life it has made me more confident about family planning. I have asked more questions about family planning than I thought.



Other patients mentioned that they have not gained any new knowledge since attending Options clinics, describing themselves as already well versed in sexual health.

One patient reflected back on when she was attending the Options clinic in her 20's, and cited some information that she wished she would have received:

I would have appreciated more information or literature on knowing your own body. That definitely would have been something that—if I knew what I know about my body today in my early 20s—would have really helped.

Significance: It is evident from our conversations with patients that attending Options clinics provides an access point to sexual health knowledge, which in turn improves many other aspects of their sexuality and sexual health. This is particularly significant because there is still a lack of comprehensive sexual health education available, and we are able to not only provide services at our clinics, but also to provide the information to fill gaps in knowledge.

Possible recommendations: There are patients who come to us who are already knowledgeable, and we are missing out on an opportunity to provide them with additional information, pleasure based information, or access to the next level of information. Additional training for our clinicians may support their ability to prompt for more complex questions; additional time with Level 2 volunteers* may facilitate rich learning opportunities for patients.

* Level 2 volunteers receive additional clinical training and are able to offer more counselling time to patients than physicians and nurses

WHAT'S YOUR SUPER (EM)POWER(MENT)?

Coming to an Options clinic builds our patients' confidence and power. When people are empowered, they have control over their choices. In the absence of empowerment, people are devoid of agency, integrity, and beliefs. We found with our patients that the combination of access to information, services, and expert care led them to have more empowerment in their sex lives. The benefits ranged from being able to ask for and give consent, to the ability to communicate their needs to their partners, feeling confident in their sexuality, and knowing that they can control their fertility.

One long-term client mentioned that as an Options patient, she was confident in her ability to determine what she was or was not comfortable with sexually, and more so that she felt empowered to say no:

Going to Options made me feel okay that I don't just have to do what my partner wants me to and that it's okay to say no.

Other patients talked about how comfortable they are with sexuality, and their rights:

It has made me more comfortable with my body and with myself. Having the understanding and strength to explore the avenues of sexuality has allowed me to be a stronger woman.

Another patient said:

I think it has made me look at sexuality as having no boundaries, that has led me to try things that would I have thought were taboo, but that it's okay to try it if I choose to.

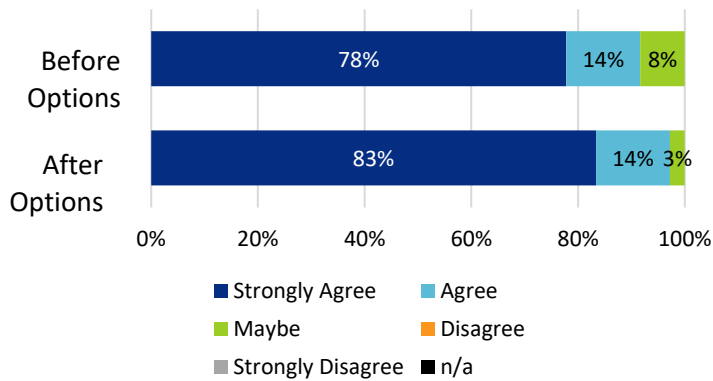
Another said:

Having gone [to Options] and knowing my rights as a woman and being able to control that, sex has been less of a big deal to me in that I feel—not in a negative way—it has empowered me to know that I don't need to be sexually active to be a whole person, and has allowed me to be a more confident woman.

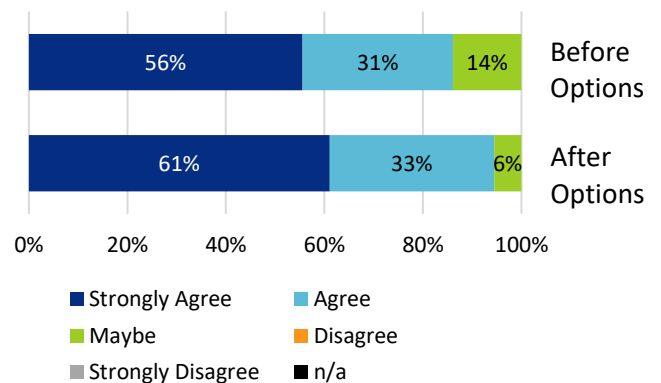
One patient articulated the growth in confidence she experienced over her years as an Options patient:

My comfort level with my body was very negative and I was insecure about my body image. Now that I have accepted and love my body, sex has improved and so has my body image. I am comfortable with sex now, but it was challenging as a teenager. I am very confident now.

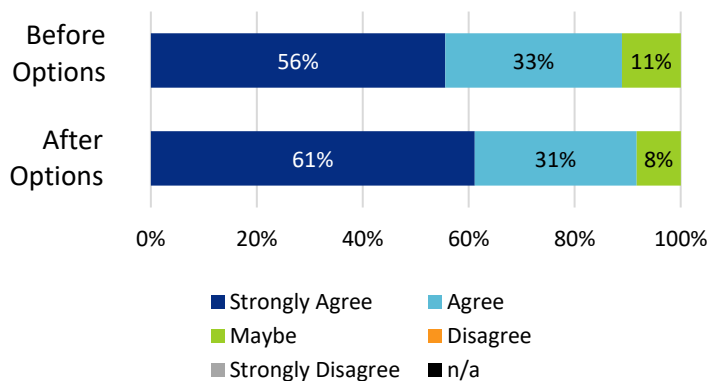
I can consent to sex when I want to



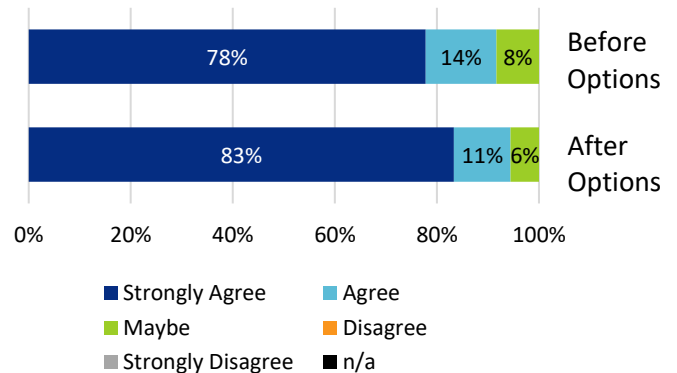
Sex is an important part of my life



Pleasure is important to me



I can ask for consent from my partners



There were also some patients who reported that Options did not empower them or give them agency. With these patients many of them also noted that they already felt empowered before they visited our clinic. Considering what we learned about our reputation as an excellent source of reliable information, we speculate that knowledgeable patients are choosing to come to us for more innovative care. The patients we spoke with tended to be quite comfortable with their sexual expression; this would explain why this increase in feelings of empowerment was only seen in some patients.

Significance: We want to be able to empower our patients and instill confidence in them. The data shows that on many levels, we are achieving this through the provision of our services. Many patients feel empowered in their sex lives, and are able to point to Options as the reason they are empowered. In particular, patients who attend our clinic for contraceptives felt like they were empowered in regards to their fertility. We thought we would see empowerment and agency for all of our patients, and while that was the case for many patients, there are still those who did not experience Options in this way. The opportunity is there for us to improve our services particularly for those attending the clinics for sexual health services beyond contraception.

Possible recommendations: In addition to offering our patients clinical care, some may benefit to being connected to our advocacy work. Patients can be directed to our website and social media pages for information which might stimulate and empower our patients' advocacy or activist side.

LGBTQ—WE'RE HERE FOR YOU

Options proudly serves patients of all genders and orientations and we have made efforts to be welcoming and competent in our care for all folks who might attend. Our commitment to making care welcoming for all was reflected in several stories that LGBTQ patients shared:

I have never seen care like I received at Options anywhere else, and I don't even believe it is possible that it could be available through the [typical] health care system. My visit affirmed my sexuality.

Another patient stated:

My friends all said Options was really cool. It's so amazing to see how open sexual health and sexuality support can truly be. I wish all doctor's clinics were like this.

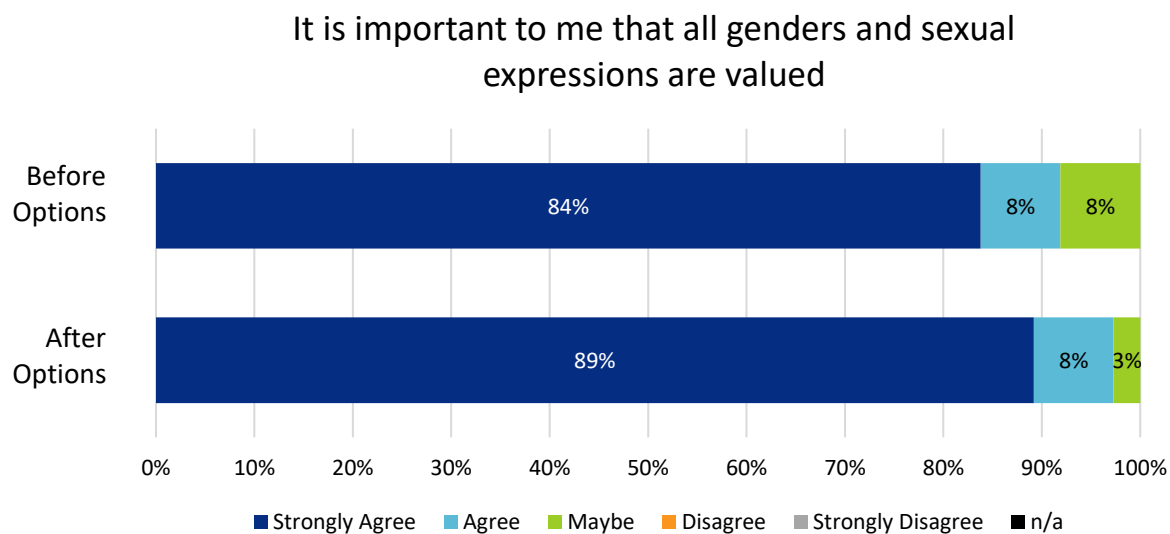
Another patient said:

Having access to the knowledge that asexuality, aromantics, and demisexuals exist makes me more comfortable about myself.

Heterosexual cis gender folks also benefit from our welcoming attitude. Several straight patients expressed how our language and policies altered their perspectives and prompted them to consider others:

Before I came to Options I wasn't against LGBTQ folks, but I also didn't have an understanding that allowed me to understand or include them. Now that I have the information, I can be an ally.

Another expressed a *"...deeper commitment to LGBTQ issues"* after coming to our clinics.



There is certainly room for us to grow, too. One patient was pleased with our welcoming care, but surprised by it since they hadn't heard of our efforts to be a safe space for all. Another patient expressed a preference for LGBTQ-exclusive care, since they felt they needed to 'come out' to our staff—an experience they didn't enjoy.

Significance: Clinical services that are welcoming to all is consistent with Options' rights-based lens. All British Columbians have the right to medical care, without fear of discrimination for their gender or their sexual expression. This commitment is clear in the hearts of Options management and staff, and in our advertising and slogan '*All ages, all genders, all orientations.*' Sexual health care that affirms the dignity of all patients, regardless of their gender expression or sexual expression, improves both the self-concept and sense of safety of those who are on the margins, but also helps create a safer community for all as we build knowledge and empathy in the dominant group.

Possible recommendations: While our Vancouver-based clinics rated well in this client survey, Options' rural staff have likely had less experience interacting with LGBTQ clients, and rural clients deserve the same care as those in more metropolitan areas. Lessons learned from the Vancouver and Kootenay Loop clinics could be shared with Options for Sexual Health clinicians during our quarterly webinars and other professional development opportunities could also be sourced.

Steps forward

Project Impact has indeed given us the language to describe just what our clinical services mean to our patients. We have had the privilege to connect deeply with clients who shared with us their vulnerability and their insights. Their words reveal the deep meaning of our work, renewing our passion for sexual health care, and directing our focus to the areas where we need to grow.

As part of our ongoing commitment to excellence in all of our services, Options plans to extend the evaluation to additional patients and sites. The solidified findings will be used to inform strategies for strengthening our clinical care.

- Based on our preliminary evaluation, plans to strengthen our clinical care currently include: Emphasize the trust placed in Options in our recruitment and onboarding process for nurses and physicians, specifically the significant impact that access to our inclusive, non-judgmental, pro-choice, sexual health experts has on our patients' quality of life.
- Increase our focus and time spent on pleasure-based information in the clinics. Clinicians will need ongoing training and support for this work. Consider increasing the number of Level 2 volunteers in clinics who could

take on this role. Explore the role of Options Educators in the clinical setting. Consider education workshops in our clinics for folks who are looking for more detailed, sex-positive information.

- Connect our clinical clients with our advocacy work and harness their passion to improve the success of our campaigns for reproductive choice, comprehensive sexual health education, etc. Consider that clinical clients would make excellent members of Options*, of our local Support Options Community Groups (SOCGs) and possibly our Board of Directors.
- Commit to expanding our reach by increasing the number of Options clinics, increasing the hours our clinics are open, and broadening our cultural competency by increasing our capacity to meet the needs of patients who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Colour (BIPOC), especially Asian and Indigenous clients. This may include new partnerships and collaborations, changes in hiring practices, and professional development (e.g. cultural competency training).

Our leadership in offering high-quality, expert care in a welcoming and sex-positive environment improves outcomes for our clients and the communities in which we work. Patients of all ages, genders, orientations, and cultures should have access to an Options clinic, and be able to reap the benefits of more freedom, more confidence, and a more accepting world for all.



* Options members receive voting privileges at our Annual General Meeting, and reduced fees for some Options events, education programs, and conferences

Appendix

Indicators of impacts

Impact #1 – Patients are in control of their fertility	
What we mean: Patients are aware of all contraceptive methods and have access to the method that works for them when they want it.	
<p>E3 (Quantitative Indicators of Impact) Patients:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • know the options available to them, and how those options work (know) • know where, when, and how to access methods (know) • know what option is best suited to them (know) • feel confident (feel) • have all the answers they were seeking (know) • choose and use a method that works for them (do) 	<p>E4 (Qualitative Indicators of Impact) Patients:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • believe in their agency and their right to effective contraception (believe) • are empowered to assert their right to effective contraception (become) • honour everyone's right to access birth control (believe) • stay true to their family choices even when faced with opposition

Impact #2 – Patients are committed to optimal sexual health	
What we mean: Patients are informed and advocate for their sexual health with their partners and their health care providers, and take advantage of all testing, screening, and treatment options available to them.	
<p>E3 (Quantitative Indicators of Impact) Patients:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are aware of their anatomy & physiology • understand how STI transmission occurs, the importance of regular testing, and how to successfully seek and complete treatment • are knowledgeable about safer sex practices • employ safer sex practices 	<p>E4 (Qualitative Indicators of Impact) Patients:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • confidently advocate for their sexual health in a way that supports them and their partners to enjoy a pleasurable and fulfilling sex life • are inspired to be sexual health advocates • love their body

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • know how to manage infections, including those that are recurring, chronic or long-term • are knowledgeable about preventative measures, such as vaccines, Pap screening, breast check-ups, and HRT options • take preventive measures • feel comfortable accessing information, testing, treatment, and preventative care and do so on a regular basis and as needed 	
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Impact #3 – Patients are empowered in their sexual expression	
<p>What we mean: Sexual health is not just limited to the absence of disease, but also includes pleasure and wellbeing. People are free to explore and celebrate their sexuality without fear, shame, stigma, or threat. Their sexual encounters and consensual and pleasurable.</p>	
<p>E3 (Quantitative Indicators of Impact)</p> <p>Patients:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • centre pleasure in their sexual experience • are aware of and support the diversity of sexual and gender expressions • explore their sexuality • know that sex is an integral part of their life • consent to sex (when they want to), and seek the consent of their partners • are aware of resources and seek knowledge to expand pleasure and wellbeing 	<p>E4 (Qualitative Indicators of Impact)</p> <p>Patients:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • celebrate their sexuality (believe) • [Patients]’ relationship to sex and intimacy is empowering, fulfilling, and inspiring (love) • honour their desire (become) • experience love and intimacy through sex (love)

Quantitative survey questions

Options for Sexual Health Clinical Experience Questionnaire

Circle the best number for each question:

	n/a	Before coming to Options...					Now that you have attended Options...				
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Maybe	Agree	Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Maybe	Agree	Strongly Agree
I know the birth control options available to me		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
I know where to access methods		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
I can choose a method that works for me		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
I can consent to sex when I want to		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
I can ask for consent from my partners		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

I understand...	n/a	Before coming to Options...					Now that you have attended Options...				
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Maybe	Agree	Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Maybe	Agree	Strongly Agree
how STI transmission occurs		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
the importance of regular testing		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
safer sex practices (e.g. condoms)		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
how to use safer sex methods		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
how to manage infections, including those that are recurring, chronic or long-term (e.g herpes)		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

	n/a	Before coming to Options...					Now that you have attended Options...				
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Maybe	Agree	Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Maybe	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pleasure is important to me		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
It is important to me that all genders and sexual expressions are valued		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Sex is an important part of my life		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
I explore my sexuality		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
I know where to go to find information about pleasure and sex		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

What is the biggest change you have seen since coming to Options?

What skills have you learned?

How often do you use the skills you have learned (Choose one):

Never Rarely Often Sometimes Always

A few questions before you are done...

Ages:

- ☐ 16-24
☐ 25-39

Gender:

- ☐ Female
☐ Male
☐ Trans
☐ Other: _____

Clinic location:

- ☐ Kootenay Loop
☐ Vancouver
☐ Both

Type of Services:

- ☐ Contraceptives
☐ IUD
☐ STI testing

How long have you been an Options Client?

Qualitative protocol questions

Know → Believe

What have you learned about contraceptive options from your visit(s) at Options? → What part of using birth control is difficult, or challenges your values? How have these visits strengthened your belief in your right to effective birth control?

What do you now know about what you can do to prevent STI transmission? What have been the big a-ha moments? → How does that make you think differently about people who get an STI? How does that make you think differently about yourself?

Since coming to Options, how has the importance of sex changed for you? → How do you celebrate your sexuality?

What are some of your knowledge gaps about sexual health? What do you wish to understand better? → Most of us have nagging perceptions about others or assumptions about ourselves that complicate our lives; what are those nagging beliefs that you wish you didn't have about sex or your sexuality?

Do → Become

What has changed about the way you choose/use birth control? → How has choosing your birth control method given you the power to ask for what you need in other areas of your life?

How have your visits to Options changed how you use safer sex practices (like using condoms, getting tested, avoiding contact, etc.)? → How has this helped you be more confident or less anxious during sexual activity?

How do you know when someone is consenting to have sex with you? How do you consent to sex? → How does honouring your boundaries and desires allow you to have more pleasure? What is complicated or confusing about consent? How have you grown as you learn to negotiate consent with others?

Feel → Love

How has coming to Options made you feel more confident in yourself and your choices? → How have your visits to Options impacted your ability to withstand opposition or disagreement from your family/friends/lover/partners?

How have your visits to Options made you feel more comfortable with your sexual expression? What used to make you uncomfortable in your sexual expression that does not as much now? → As a result, what positive feelings about your body have been awakened in you?

How is sex more fun now than it used to be before you came to Options? → How have sex and intimacy inspired, fulfilled, and empowered you more than it used to? What concerns you more now, or makes you more uncomfortable now that didn't used to bother you very much? → How have these things developed your personal commitment to comprehensive sexual health information and care?

In your mind, what is the most significant result of Options in your life? → If you were to put into practice what you have received here as fully as possible in the next few years, what does your life look like 5 years from now?