

Study Of The Sexual and HIV Risk Behaviour
of Gay and Bisexual Men Dublin 1992

Quinlan M, Pomeroy L, Barry J., Wyse D
Eastern Health Board, Gay Men's Health Project 1992

INTRODUCTION

In order to assess the need for HIV / Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) preventative and clinic services amongst sexually active gay men in Dublin, the Eastern Health Board undertook an important study of 500 men having sex with men.

METHOD

Firstly, an extensive questionnaire was drafted with some help from the similar 1988 Gay Health Action Survey. Information on age, sexual orientation, age of first sexual intercourse, whether HIV tested or not, and sexual practices including anal intercourse. Information on condom use and history of sexually transmitted diseases including hepatitis B was sought.

A pilot study among 40 men refined the questionnaire.

From December 1991 - January 1992 500 gay/bisexual men were targeted in Dublin city venues. This was done through outreach counsellors delivering the questionnaires, to bars, clubs, saunas, some public sites, organisations and to some "off scene" contacts. Respondents were asked to answer the 42 questions there and place them in collection boxes.

The questionnaire was self-administered, anonymous and all information was treated as strictly confidential.

STUDY POPULATION PROFILE.

Of 550 questionnaires distributed a total of 481 men responded during the one month period. All participants did not necessarily reply to all questions therefore the totals may be less for individual questions.

The **age profile** of 470 respondents breaks down as follows:

39% (185) were 24 years or younger of whom 16 (3%) were less than 18 years.

42% (199) were 25 years - 34 years.

18% (86) were 35 years and over.

Of 472 men who responded to the question on **sexual orientation**:

81% (381) self-identified as being gay.

11% (58) self-identified as bisexual.

7% (33) self-identified as men having sex with men.

The 3% who were 18 years and less verifies the young age at which men are "coming out" and using "on the scene" venues.

Furthermore, the question as to when respondents **started having gay sex** indicated that 62% (298) of respondents started when 18 years or less, 35% (170) were over 18 years, and 3% (13) were 30 years and over. The greater proportion are reporting sexual activity while under 18 years (62%) which emphasises the need for sexual health education amongst this group.

SEXUAL HEALTH INDICATORS HIV. STDS. HEPATITIS B.

The data on HIV and STDs including hepatitis B are presented together as overall indicators of sexual health among the study group.

The HIV test results among 366 men who answered this question indicated 53% were of **unknown HIV status**. This high proportion of "unknown" may be attributed to unwillingness to test, failure to perceive the clinical advantage of testing, continuing risk after testing or failure to return for results.

Only 32% (138) reported having had an **STD screen**. Furthermore, 121 men reported having had an STD diagnosis. Such information indicates there is a poor uptake of STD screening amongst this group. STD screening is more likely to be sought only when symptoms arise despite the fact that many STDs may produce no symptoms at all. Such screening is not perceived as an important means of maintaining health.

This suggests that respondents might benefit from more specific targeting of education and service provision which might encourage this population to address these areas.

The third element which the study highlights is **hepatitis B**. Information from 445 men shows that 4 % (17) had a definite history of hepatitis B previously. Of 395 respondents to the question about hepatitis B vaccination only 14% (55) had been vaccinated. Again the majority 84% of men indicated that they did not consider hepatitis B as being a concern in their perception of sexual health. Poor availability of free vaccine and lack of accessible information on hepatitis B as a sexual health risk may account for this high figure. Either way, there are implications for the future development of public health strategies among this sexually active group.

SEXUAL PRACTICE Anal Intercourse Condoms and Perceived Risk.

To get an overview picture of sexual practice, questions focussed on anal intercourse and use of condoms. Four hundred and sixty eight men replied to the question on anal intercourse in the past year, 58% (270) had had anal intercourse of whom 22% never used condoms and 25% sometimes used condoms. The remaining 53% always used condoms. Anal sex is widely practiced among this study group. This represents a significant risk for HIV and STD infection including hepatitis B. While acknowledging that there may be a variety of reasons for intercourse without protection (e.g. lack of knowledge, poor negotiating skills, alcohol/drugs disinhibition), it is clear that a range of education and prevention needs among this group need to be addressed.

SUMMARY

The findings of this survey suggest there is a need for continuing education on HIV and other STDs. Prevention strategies such as condom use for all **anal** intercourse need to be focused on. The concept of sexual health being something that should be actively sought by regular STD screening needs to be promoted. This is particularly important as many sexually transmitted diseases including hepatitis B may cause no initial symptoms and can only be detected in this way.

The information gained from this survey has allowed the Eastern Health Board to focus on these particular areas when planning services for the community. A clinic (The Gay Men's Health Project) has been running at Baggot Street Hospital since October 1992. We provide HIV testing, STD screening and hepatitis B vaccination. Counselling and advice on these and related health issues are also available in a relaxed and informal setting. The clinic currently runs on Tuesday evening 7.30 - 9 p.m. but due to the excellent response we hope to extend this shortly to two evenings per week.

The outreach programme is continuing to provide information and education on HIV and STD to the community.

We would like to thank all who participated in this survey which we found of immense value in establishing and improving service.

GMHP 1992