



GAY HEALTH NETWORK

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STATEMENT TO THE HSE OCTOBER 2020

‘In honouring the 28 years of the sexual health service to the gay community, GHN calls on the HSE for the immediate reopening of GMHS.’

Gay Health Network (GHN) represents organisations and individuals working to promote HIV prevention and sexual health and wellbeing for gay, bisexual, and men who have sex with men. Our Network is deeply concerned about the potential consequences for our community of the decision to close the Gay Men’s Health Service (GMHS). We are calling on the HSE to reopen this vital service as a matter of priority.

On October 6th 1992, eight months before homosexual acts were decriminalised in the Republic of Ireland, the Eastern Health Board (EHB) launched the Gay Men’s Health Project (later the Gay Men’s Health Service (GMHS)). The Project opened its doors at Baggot St Hospital to provide the first STI service for men who have sex with men (MSM). Last year, GMHS moved to a new home at the Meath Primary Care Centre Dublin 8 and was providing STI services on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday and a PrEP clinic on Thursday. In addition, it provided an outreach community STI testing clinic at Outhouse LGBT Centre on the third Saturday of every month. These clinics are vital to the treatment and prevention of STIs. The PrEP clinic is vital to HIV prevention among a key target population, as outlined in the National Sexual Health Strategy and the National PrEP programme, Research and HPSC Reports.

From the outset, GMHS was active in the LGBT+ community and is considered an important community health service. Along with others it participated in many community initiatives, including the establishment of Outhouse, BelongTo, Johnny Peer Group and PRIDE events. GMHS also designed and delivered the popular Personal Development Courses, provision of outreach and counselling at Outhouse and involvement in the Annual Gay Health Forum. In fact, GMHS was instrumental in the establishment of GHN in 1994 and is an active member to date.

Unfortunately, due to the onset of COVID-19 and the redeployment of GMHS staff the clinic has been closed since March last. Many other HSE public STI

clinics have also had their services closed or reduced. Recently most of these clinics have resumed services and the staff of GMHS were upgrading their medical recording to an electronic system for their expected reopening. Over the last month or so the GMHS staff were redeployed once again, halting the reopening of these urgently needed services.

In the 28 years since the establishment of GMHS, over 120,000 of MSM have attended the service. The yearly increase of attendees and detection of STIs and HIV continued in 2019. For example, of the 1,176 new attendees: 29% had never tested for HIV and 39% for STIs, nearly one third (29%) were diagnosed with an STI¹. Already in 2019, the HPSC reported continued increases in Syphilis, Gonorrhoea, LGV among MSM² and GMHS was also detecting high rates of STIs (one in five of those testing)³.

Ireland is one of the few countries in the world providing a statutory service to gay and bisexual men via the public health sector. The continued closure of the GMHS clinic has greatly affected the community and many are disheartened especially among those who found it a safe space. What they, and accordingly GHN, see, is that while other public STI services are opening again, the most successful and busy service specifically for gay and bisexual men remains closed. We are especially concerned that the closure, coupled with the continued increase in diagnosed STIs will have negative impact particularly on the more vulnerable members of our community who relied on the service, including younger men, sex workers, migrants, trans people and non binary people⁴.

Since 2010, GHN has worked in partnership with the HSE, particularly with SHCPP on the man2man.ie programme and the HPSC on research as part of the National Sexual Health Strategy. We greatly value these partnerships and we recognise that there are many other urgent sexual health issues that need to be managed alongside the ongoing COVID-19 upsurge. In recognising the health impacts on MSM we call for priority planning for the return of GMHS.

We look forward to receiving a response to our request and are available to meet with the HSE at a mutually convenient time.

¹ <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/5/sexhealth/gmhs/research/gmhs-annual-report-2019.pdf>.

² <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/specificpopulations/menwhohavesexwithmenmsm/>

³ https://www.hpsc.ie/az/specificpopulations/menwhohavesexwithmenmsm/guidance/MSM%20outbreak%20response%20action%20plan_June_2017.pdf

⁴ Younger men, sex workers, migrants and trans and non-binary people are at a higher risk of HIV and STIs and they face more barriers to access testing, counselling and treatment: https://www.who.int/hiv/pub/guidelines/msm_guidelines2011/en/

https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/2015_young_men_sex_with_men_en.pdf

https://www.hpsc.ie/az/specificpopulations/menwhohavesexwithmenmsm/guidance/MSM%20outbreak%20response%20action%20plan_June_2017.pdf



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