

*(This is an unofficial translation of a press release from the Thailand Ministry of Public Health, as noted below. The original release, in Thai, is available from the Office of Public Relations.)*

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## **News for Media**

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### **HIV Infection Soars among Men who have Sex with Men**

On 25 August 2005 at 10:00 AM at Ambassador City Jomtien Pattaya, Prof. Dr. Suchai Charoenrattanukul, the Public Health Minister, gave an interview on the AIDS epidemic situation among MSM (men who have sex with men) in an academic conference held annually by the Public Health Ministry, after an award ceremony to honor colleagues of the Ministry of Public Health whose scholarly works had been cited in 2004. A [recent] study, conducted in Bangkok shows that the number of MSM with HIV has increased to 28.3% in 2005, from 17.3% in 2003. Safe sex behavior among MSM by using condoms was called for in the conference.

He stated that the Ministry of Public Health, in cooperation with the Thai – US CDC Collaboration (TUC), the Rainbow Sky Association and the AIDS Project of the Thai Red Cross, makes a survey of rates of HIV infection among men who have sex with men every two years to identify possible prevention measures to counteract changing sexual behavior among high-risk groups. The survey was taken from 13 June to 9 July 2005 with 400 MSM (who were not sex workers) and 350 male sex workers. This study was done completely anonymously. The study shows that 28.3% of men who are not sex workers are infected with HIV--of the 400 tested, 113 were HIV positive. The infection rate is a big increase from the previous results in 2003, which found 17.3% of these men to be HIV-infected. Of the 168 tested sex workers in public parks, 38, or 22.6%, were found to be HIV-positive. 15.4% of sex workers in bars were found to have HIV (28 HIV-positive cases found from the total number of 182 tested in bars).

In addition, the study shows an increase of MSM who have had casual sex with multiple sex partners and did not always use condoms from 20.9% in 2003 to 25% in 2005. This is the primary cause for HIV infection among MSM. Also these high-risk people are reluctant to get blood tests, to seek services from hospitals and counseling clinics, thus increasing the HIV rate. Also, another study is being conducted in Chiang Mai and Phuket.

The health minister said the outcome of the study causes grave concern over the spread of HIV/AIDS among MSM. The Public Health Ministry convened a meeting on 17 August to find a solution in combating the disease by launching a prevention campaign and providing health care services for the treatment of HIV/AIDS and sexually

transmitted diseases. He said more sex education campaigns emphasizing condoms are emphatically needed to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The Public Health Ministry has mobilized support from various independent groups advocating safe sex and appropriate sexual behavior for men who have sex with men. UNESCO supports the website, [www.healthgay.com](http://www.healthgay.com), to give information and educate MSM men about AIDS. Started in February 2005, the website is proving popular for the targeted group, with more than 200,000 visits to the website so far. Moreover, non-government organizations such as SWING (Service Workers In Group), M-Plus, the Thai Red Cross, the Rainbow Sky Association, Doctors Without Borders and the Thai Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS, plus the Bangkok city government, are working to establish awareness of HIV/AIDS prevention through activities directed toward gay men.

The Public Health Ministry has been helping to support all organizations working to minimize the HIV epidemic. For instance, its Disease Control section of the Division of Sexually Transmitted Diseases launched a one-year pilot project of providing clinical services, reaching about one hundred gay men monthly. This pilot project will be a good model for other networks or any organizations in neighboring provinces to adopt.

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