

Questions and Answers about the increased HIV infection rates among men who have sex with men (MSM) in Bangkok, Thailand in 2005

A recent study has found an alarming increase in the rate of HIV infection among MSM in Bangkok, Thailand. Of 400 men sampled from venues where MSM come to socialize and meet sexual partners, such as bars, saunas, and public parks, 28% were HIV infected. The study is a repeat of a similar study conducted in 2003, when the HIV infection rate was 17%. The 2005 study also investigated smaller samples of street-based (n=182) and venue-based (n=168) male sex workers in Bangkok, which had HIV infection rates of 23% and 15%, respectively. The study was conducted between 13 June and 16 July 2005, by the Thailand Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) in collaboration with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Thai Red Cross Society and the Rainbow Sky Association of Thailand.

Q: The HIV infection rate among MSM has risen from 17% in 2003 to 28% in 2005. How is this possible?

A: As shown by the study data described above, the epidemic of HIV infection in this group is driven by unprotected, mostly male to male sexual intercourse, that is, anal sex without a condom. There does need to be further analysis of the data to understand better what factors are associated with these behaviors. In the mean time, we need to promote consistent and correct condom use with appropriate lubricant (water-based), partner reduction including abstinence, along with voluntary HIV testing and counseling for this population in order to reduce and/or eliminate unsafe sexual behavior.

Q: Does the study really represent the total population of MSM in Bangkok?

A: The study used the best scientific methods available, even though it was limited to men attending MSM “venues”. A cross-sectional assessment, using venue-day-time sampling, was conducted. Demographic and behavioral data were collected using an interviewer-administered questionnaire.

There are more than 300 MSM venues in Bangkok alone, and therefore the actual number of people (MSM) is very large. We do not know how many MSM there are in Bangkok but estimates range between 200,000 and 300,000 men. This study demonstrates that the risk for HIV infection among these men is high and has increased over the past 2 years.

Q: Can the increase in HIV infection be explained by differences in study design, sampling methodology and HIV testing procedures in 2003 and 2005?

A: There are no indications that such factors have impacted the results. The design of the study, sampling methodology and HIV testing procedures in 2005 were exactly the same as in 2003. There were also no differences in demographic characteristics between the test participants in 2003 and 2005. As well, HIV positive rates for Thai MSM who have voluntarily tested at Bangkok's Anonymous Clinic have shown similar rapid rises in HIV infection rates over the past few years.

Q: But only saliva from a person's mouth was tested. Is that accurate?

A: In fact, the type of oral testing used in the survey identifies HIV antibodies in mucous from a person's oral fluid, not in their saliva. Testing of oral fluid for the detection of HIV antibodies has shown results similar to the testing of serum (blood), with an accuracy rate of 99.8% and up. This type of test is now widely used as the first choice in HIV antibody testing in the West due to its accuracy, safety (no needles) and ease of use.

Q: What is the MOPH doing to stop the HIV epidemic among MSM?

A: Since the first study in 2003, the MOPH has been working with INGOs and community partners to expand HIV testing services for MSM, to implement peer-led interventions and to improve the social situation of MSM. At this time, additional planning is underway to develop strategies and immediate actions to help stop the spread of HIV infection among MSM, including increased and new prevention methods at MSM venues, in mass

media and on the internet. The MOPH is also working to establish a research infrastructure to investigate the HIV epidemic among Thai MSM and evaluate interventions to prevent it.

Q: Do Thai MSM now have the highest HIV infection rates in the world?

A: No, the current Bangkok HIV infection rates are similar to those found among MSM in urban areas in the Western world, such as Amsterdam, New York and San Francisco. One difference may be important, however: the rates in Bangkok seem to have gone up only fairly recently.

Q: What is the role of drug use in the spread of HIV in this group?

A: We know that injection drug use is associated with transmission of HIV infection. Although some recreational drug use was revealed in this population, virtually no injection drug use (<1%) was reported in 2003 or 2005. Therefore, it seems that drug use has limited impact on HIV infection rates among MSM in Bangkok.

Q: What is being done about this bad news?

A: The Thailand MOPH is organizing urgent meetings with stakeholders and national and international non-governmental organizations to discuss strategies to stop the spread of HIV among Thai MSM. The investigators are currently completing data-collection in other urban areas of the country and are analyzing the results. As mentioned before, prevention activities at MSM venues, in the mass media and on the internet will continue as well as increase as soon as funding becomes available.

Q: What can I do to help?

A: Many of the MSM organizations rely on volunteers, so please consider giving your time and/or money to one of them. Also, tell your friends and neighbors about this problem but do it in way that does not blame men who have sex with men or make MSM look like "bad" people. HIV is only a virus

that can infect anyone and in a number of ways. Consider getting tested yourself, too. We all want to protect our loved ones and ourselves.

You may use this material in any way that you feel is appropriate.

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