



MSM Navigating the Web: Emerging Issues and Innovations in HIV Prevention

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Introduction

The Internet is an invaluable communication tool and a critical adjunct in disseminating and exchanging information among public health workers, other health and human service professionals, and the general public. While it has great potential in advancing public health, the Internet and its use and applications also present challenges that can conflict with public health.

This paper examines the role of the Internet as it relates to the growing HIV epidemic among men who have sex with men (MSM). It explores the issue of how some MSM use the Internet to connect with sex partners and how this may result in high risk sexual behaviors. The paper also examines the use of Internet-based information technologies to support HIV prevention efforts among MSM.

Background

Over the past ten years, the number of Internet users has grown exponentially. The Internet is an effective and efficient way for persons to connect with one another professionally and socially. Internet technologies and applications such as e-mail, online meetings, live streaming video, instant messaging, and emerging technologies provide consumers and business, professional, and academic communities the tools for the efficient transfer of information.

The Internet enables individuals to join an ever-expanding array of social networks. Websites such as MySpace.com and Facebook.com and a variety of blogs create virtual communities where persons of all backgrounds can connect with others sharing common interests and exploring diverse ideas and opinions.

For some, the Internet has become an expanding social network beyond that of simply meeting friends and establishing informal or casual relationships. The Pew Internet and American Life Project found that most online Americans who reported being single and seeking a “date” have used the Internet to pursue romantic interests (Madden and Lenhart, 2006). One in ten internet users indicated they have personally gone to dating websites or other sites where they can meet people online.

Studies indicate that the majority of MSM use the Internet to access gay-oriented websites and that a high percentage (30-60%) of these men have met a sex partner through the web (Benotsch et al., 2002; Bolding et al., 2007; Davis et al., 2006; Grov et al., 2007a&b; Liau et al. 2006). MSM who seek sex partners through the Internet report higher rates of sexual risk behaviors including unprotected anal intercourse (UAI) (Benotsch et al, 2002; Grov et al., 2007a; Liau et al. 2006; McFarlane et al, 2000).

A syphilis outbreak among MSM in San Francisco was a pivotal public health event that identified risks associated with Internet use as well as effective use of the Internet as a public health intervention. During the summer of 1999, an outbreak of early syphilis occurred among MSM who met their sex partners on the Internet (Klausner et al, 2000). During the period 1998 – 2002, the number of early syphilis cases increased from 41 cases in 1998 to 495 cases in 2002 and the proportion of cases among MSM increased from 22% in 1998 to 88% in 2002. A review of 151 early syphilis cases among MSM interviewed for partner management during January – April 2003 showed that 67 (44%) of men reported meeting sex partners over the Internet; 14 (21%) provided information about 44 sex partners for whom the only locating information was an Internet e-mail address.

Summary

There is increasing concern about the growing HIV epidemic among MSM. Research findings indicate that Internet use is associated with increasing HIV-related high risks behaviors by MSM. While bars and bath houses were popular venues for social networking in the past, the Internet is recognized by MSM as a primary way to meet new friends and sexual partners.

Persons in Wisconsin with high risk behaviors associated with acquiring or transmitting STDs and HIV report frequent use of Internet social networking for finding friends and sexual partners.

Because new cases of HIV among MSM in Wisconsin are increasing and Internet-based prevention interventions have demonstrated success, Internet-based HIV prevention directed to MSM in Wisconsin should expand.

In response to these surveillance findings, the San Francisco Health Department and community partners utilized several Internet-related technologies to facilitate the prevention and control of the epidemic (Klausner et al, 2004). Internet-based prevention interventions included:

- one-on-one outreach through instant messaging and e-mail contact with persons online in chat rooms on AOL, personal profiles on Craigslist and M4M4Sex;
- banner ad placement in San Francisco-specific chat rooms and personal ad areas of select websites;
- an internet-based educational site consisting of a Q&A forum hosted by a physician and nurse practitioner;
- message board forums maintained on Gay.com and Craigslist;
- placement of site-specific page warnings about the risk of multiple partners and transmission of syphilis; and
- online access to syphilis testing through www.STDTest.org.

Experience gained from the San Francisco syphilis elimination efforts has prompted service providers to recommend health policy initiatives similar to those of tobacco control, to reduce high risk sexual behavior among MSM who use the Internet (Levine & Klausner, 2005). Others have encouraged cooperative efforts between public health and Internet-based social networking businesses in promoting positive health messages on the Internet.

Harm reduction, behavioral and social factors

Some HIV positive MSM use the Internet for purposes of serosorting and harm reduction by seeking out other HIV-positive sexual partners. Studies have also found that some HIV positive MSM men use the Internet to find partners of unknown serostatus (Halkitis & Parsons, 2003). These findings suggest an important role for ongoing Internet-based prevention education directed to MSM.

A variety of psychosocial variables have been suggested for disengagement from risk reduction measures and high risk behaviors, among MSM in general as well as MSM using the Internet. These include safer sex burn-out, condom fatigue, sexual compulsivity, substance abuse, and social isolation related to stigmatization. Researchers suggest that these behavioral and social factors as well as the unique characteristics of the venue of Internet should be addressed when developing HIV prevention interventions for MSM (Bolding et al, 2005).

Nationally recognized resources for developing Internet interventions for MSM

Internet Sexuality Information Services

Internet Sexuality Information Services, Inc. (ISIS) (www.isis-inc.org) is a nationally recognized private nonprofit organization dedicated to developing and using Internet technologies to prevent disease transmission and enhance sexual well being of individuals and communities. ISIS developed several innovative Internet-based prevention tools including InSPOT.org, a peer partner notification website that is being replicated in cities, states, and countries around the world. (See InSPOT-Wisconsin below). ISIS was a collaborative partner with the San Francisco Health Department in developing and implementing several Internet-based interventions addressing the syphilis epidemic that emerged in San Francisco in 1998 and which was discussed earlier in this paper.

PowerOn

PowerOn (www.poweryouroutreach.com) is a national web-based content provider for HIV/STD and sexuality-related information. Developed by the University of Washington in Seattle, PowerOn is a multi-layered online outreach program that has been established in Seattle, Tacoma, Kansas City, and Peoria. Content is deployed through customized websites for subscribers (a.k.a. sponsors). PowerOn embeds customizable community referral links and resources in a PowerOn website template which enables sponsoring groups to provide and support a localized version of the PowerOn site.

Summary Recommendations

General Principles

Development and implementation of Internet-based STD/HIV prevention efforts should follow the *National Guidelines for Internet-based STD and HIV Prevention*, developed under the leadership of the National Coalition of STD Directors (NCSD).

Internet-based prevention resources should be culturally relevant to a variety of MSM communities in Wisconsin, including youth, using language and words that are easily understood and familiar to MSM.

Internet-based prevention resources targeting MSM should include content that actively supports the development and mastery of Internet safety skills by LGBT youth.

Internet-based prevention efforts and messages should endorse and promote HIV prevention best practices, including the current standard of annual HIV testing of MSM.

PowerON uses peer educators to assist in changing MSM social chat room norms to be more supportive of safer sex. Peer educators interact with MSM by conducting online outreach in chat and profile rooms where, as peers, they bring safer sex messages to friends. The PowerON intervention identifies venues and settings where MSM gather online, such as Gay.com and Manhunt.net. Once the venue to conduct the outreach has been secured, online opinion leaders are recruited to attend the PowerON volunteer training. In Spring 2008, PowerOn was promoting and marketing its products and services to agencies interested in implementing and subscribing to a beta-version of PowerOn.

StopAIDS.org

The STOP AIDS Project, a private nonprofit community-based agency in San Francisco, has a comprehensive website (www.stopaids.org) which represents an Internet portal targeting diverse MSM communities. The portal highlights the agency's focus on sexual networks and how the agency is directing its resources to six sexual networks -- including the Internet -- where gay, bi and trans men meet. The internet component STOP AIDS, known as "dotMEN," is directed helping gay, bi and trans men cruise and hook up online in safer, healthier ways.

HIV prevention social marketing websites

There are a variety of HIV-related social marketing websites that focus on MSM as well as other target audiences. While an exhaustive review of these websites is beyond the scope of this paper, the following are social marketing websites that have emerged during the HIV epidemic and which may assist in stimulating the development of related social marketing directed to Wisconsin MSM:

www.stdcheckup.org
www.gettestedboston.org
www.bucksyphilis.org
www.healthypenis.org
www.hivstopswithme.org
www.resistmeth.org

National Guidelines for Internet-Based STD and HIV Prevention

In March 2008, the National Coalition of STD

Directors (NCSD) released guidelines for health departments and community-based nonprofit organizations on the use of the Internet as a tool for controlling and preventing STDs including HIV (NCSD, 2008). The guidelines, titled *National Guidelines for Internet-based STD and HIV Prevention: Accessing the Power of the Internet for Public Health*, focus on three types of Internet activities that support STD/HIV prevention: Internet-based Partner Services, Outreach, and Health Communications.

The guidelines on Internet-based Partner Services focuses on use of the Internet to conduct or enhance the method of notifying a person of their potential exposure to an infectious disease. The Internet-based Outreach guidelines address ways to effectively reach online communities through outreach efforts that have demonstrated success. The guidelines for Health Communications, released in draft form in May of 2008, focus on elements of sustaining an effective online presence through websites, banner ads, mobile devices (cell phones and personal digital assistants), audio/video (including news feeds, podcasts, vodcasts), and video games/gaming. The guidelines acknowledge that the use of the Internet for the control and prevention of STDs is new and that there is limited evidence to suggest that any one approach or procedure is better than another. In light of this, the guidelines differentiate two practice levels – a "framework level" which is a preferred practice based on past success and a "recommendation level" which includes optional practices based on early or initial experience. The recommendation level applies to the guidelines regarding Health Communications on the Internet. The *National Guidelines for Internet-based STD and HIV Prevention* are located on the website of the NCSD at www.ncsddc.org.

Wisconsin Internet-based initiatives

Wisconsin HIV/STD/Hepatitis C Information and Referral Center

Funded through the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, the Wisconsin HIV/STD/Hepatitis C Information and Referral Center (IRC) provides Wisconsin residents access to

Summary Recommendations

Because communication technologies are constantly changing, HIV prevention service providers should continually monitor new and promising developments in electronic communications to ensure that state of the art technologies are being utilized effectively and efficiently in reaching diverse MSM community members in Wisconsin.

Wisconsin AIDS/HIV Program staff should maintain current knowledge regarding developments in electronic communications in order to promote capacity building through consultation and technical assistance directed to service providers.

Wisconsin AIDS/HIV Program should develop capacity building expertise, internally or externally, regarding the development and implementation of Internet-based prevention technologies targeting MSM.

The Wisconsin AIDS/HIV Program should assess grantee capacity building needs regarding the development and utilization of Internet-based information technologies.

information and referral (I&R) services for HIV infection, sexually transmitted diseases, and hepatitis C infection through:

- hotline services that are available toll-free, 24 hours-a-day, 7 days-a-week to provide Wisconsin residents I&R services regarding HIV infection, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and hepatitis C infection;
- web-based public health I&R services which provide individuals access to primarily web-based information resources regarding HIV infection, STDs, and hepatitis C infection as well as access to the IRC database of Wisconsin HIV, STD, and hepatitis C service providers; and
- training and technical assistance for consumers and service providers regarding the use of information technologies that address the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of HIV infection, STDs, and hepatitis C infection. The IRC website is located at www.irc-wisconsin.org.

In 2008, the IRC projects its services to include 7,650 hotline calls, 24,000 hits to its website, 400 email communications, distribution of 17,000 education materials, bimonthly listserv postings to an average of 375 persons, and training events directed to 40 individuals.

ImSexEd

In 2006, the AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin (ARCW) launched an Internet chat room HIV prevention intervention known as ImSexEd. Through prevention educators, the intervention provides:

- current and medically accurate information regarding HIV and other STDs;
- HIV and STD testing, treatment information, and locations;
- education resources that promote safe sexual practices and wellness; and
- social service and health related referrals.

Prevention educators enter chat rooms on gay.com and Adam4Adam.com for 1 to 2 hour sessions where they identify themselves to chatters and post proactive instant messages promoting men's sexual health. These messages encourage interested chatters to instant message them for a private conversation. ImSexEd staff average 2 one-on-one conversations with individual chatters per session. ARCW estimates approximately 21,000 Internet contacts annually through ImSexEd, including one-on-one contacts and the broader reach of message

exposure to MSM in chat rooms where ImSexEd staff are present.

InSPOT-Wisconsin

In July 2007, Wisconsin began implementing the use of the Internet for STD peer partner notification, disclosure assistance and referrals through www.InSPOT.org, a website where persons diagnosed with HIV/STDs may send electronic cards to partners to inform them of a potential exposure. First launched in San Francisco in 2004 for gay and bisexual men, the site is now being replicated in cities, states and countries around the world. It is also being expanded to be inclusive of all audiences, regardless of sexual orientation. In addition to electronic partner notification cards, the InSPOT-Wisconsin website includes referral information for Wisconsin STD testing resources as well as information on the signs, symptoms, and treatment of STDs; sexual health; and risk reduction.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is increasing concern about the growing HIV epidemic among MSM. A recent CDC study examining HIV/AIDS cases reported from 2001-2006 in 33 states with name-associated reporting found that among MSM ages 13-24 years, statistically significant increases in diagnoses were observed in nearly all racial/ethnic populations (CDC, 2008). This finding calls for increasing and targeted risk reduction interventions for MSM, particularly young MSM.

Research findings indicate that Internet use is associated with increasing HIV-related high risks behaviors by MSM. While bars and bath houses were popular venues for social networking in the past, the Internet is recognized by MSM as a primary way to meet new friends and sexual partners.

Persons in Wisconsin with high risk behaviors associated with acquiring or transmitting STDs and HIV report frequent use of Internet social networking for finding friends and sexual partners. Clients interviewed during 2007 syphilis investigations in Milwaukee reported frequent use of the websites Adam4Adam.com, gay.com, Manhunt.com and Yahoo.com. Other popular websites identified by clients of HIV service providers in Wisconsin included Gayblackchat.com, Manhunt.com, and Craigslist.com. Wis-

Summary Recommendations continued...

HIV prevention service providers should collaborate with the business community in promoting HIV prevention and health promotion messages to MSM through websites and other electronic communications directed to MSM patrons.

Internet-based communications and prevention efforts should acknowledge anonymity as a tool for promoting positive health rather than viewing anonymity as a risk or impediment to prevention.

Internet-based communications and information resources should be accessible to gay youth and young MSM, respecting their personal right for privacy and unrestricted access to information.

Evaluation should be an integral part of the design and implementation of all HIV Internet-based communication and prevention efforts. Adequate resources should support ongoing data collection and evaluation.

consin providers of HIV Partner Services report HIV positive clients posting personal ads on websites such as HIVPoz.net in order to find sex partners.

Because new cases of HIV among MSM in Wisconsin are increasing and Internet-based prevention interventions have demonstrated success, Internet-based HIV prevention directed to MSM in Wisconsin should expand in the following ways and in the following areas:

General principles:

Development and implementation of Internet-based STD/HIV prevention efforts should follow the *National Guidelines for Internet-based STD and HIV Prevention*, developed under the leadership of the National Coalition of STD Directors (NCSD).

Internet-based prevention resources should be culturally relevant to a variety of MSM communities in Wisconsin, including youth, using language and words that are easily understood and familiar to MSM.

Internet-based prevention resources targeting MSM should include content that actively supports the development and mastery of Internet safety skills by LGBT youth.

Internet-based prevention efforts and messages should endorse and promote HIV prevention best practices, including the current standard of annual HIV testing of MSM.

Because communication technologies are constantly changing, HIV prevention service providers should continually monitor new and promising developments in electronic communications to ensure that state of the art technologies are being utilized effectively and efficiently in reaching diverse MSM community members in Wisconsin.

Wisconsin AIDS/HIV Program staff should maintain current knowledge regarding developments in electronic communications in order to promote capacity building through consultation and technical assistance directed to service providers.

Wisconsin AIDS/HIV Program should develop capacity building expertise, internally or externally, regarding the development and implementation of Internet-based prevention tech-

nologies targeting MSM.

The Wisconsin AIDS/HIV Program should assess grantee capacity building needs regarding the development and utilization of Internet-based information technologies.

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Evaluation should be an integral part of the design and implementation of all HIV Internet-based communication and prevention efforts. Adequate resources should support ongoing data collection and evaluation.

Health Communication Specific Recommendations

Because HIV prevention should be integral part of a comprehensive approach to promoting the health of MSM, an Internet portal broadly focused on the health and well being of MSM should be developed in Wisconsin. The portal should complement and promote integration of current successful Internet-based STD- and HIV-related prevention activities rather than duplicate content and should be linked to the information and referral database of the Wisconsin HIV/STD/Hepatitis C Information and Referral Center.

Banner ad placement should be used routinely to increase access to key prevention messages and to link individuals to needed information and referral resources.

Outreach Specific Recommendations

Outreach Internet-based prevention interventions conducted on social networking sites should be expanded and evaluated to ensure that these approaches are effectively reaching MSM at highest risk for HIV infection.

**Summary
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continued...**

**Health Communication
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Because HIV prevention should be integral part of promoting the health of MSM, an Internet portal broadly focused on the health and well being of MSM should be developed in Wisconsin.

**Outreach
Recommendation**

Outreach Internet-based prevention interventions conducted on social networking sites should be expanded and evaluated to ensure that these approaches are effectively reaching MSM at highest risk for HIV infection.

**Partner Services
Recommendations**

InSPOT-Wisconsin should be promoted and utilized as an alternative for partner self-referral by MSM with HIV and STDs.

HIV Partner Services providers should utilize email and other Internet-based technologies to locate and communicate with partners of HIV-positive persons who are known to have utilized Internet venues and technologies as their primary mode of connecting with partners.

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InSPOT-Wisconsin should be promoted and utilized as an alternative for partner self-referral by MSM with HIV and other STDs.

HIV Partner Services providers should utilize e-mail and other Internet-based technologies to locate and communicate with the partners of HIV-positive persons who are known to have utilized Internet venues and technologies as their primary mode of connecting with partners.

The Wisconsin AIDS/HIV Program and the Wisconsin STD Program should collaboratively maintain surveillance of the most frequently visited social networking websites utilized by clients receiving HIV and STD Partner Services.

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