



September 13, 2005

Dear Colleague:

The Internet is becoming an important venue for meeting sex partners and planning participation in risky sexual behavior. This letter is to alert you to the risk behaviors associated with Internet use, the intervention potential of the Internet, and to encourage you to consider exploring the Internet as a potential venue for disease-control efforts.

Numerous reports indicate that the Internet has become one of the most popular venues for meeting sex partners among men who have sex with men (MSM). A study from Denver in 2000 showed that about 16% of clients presenting for HIV testing had sought sex partners online. Among California MSM with primary or secondary syphilis, the Internet is one of the two most frequently reported venues for meeting sex partners. Clusters in Chicago, Florida, Boston, Kentucky, and other central and east-coast areas indicate that the problem is widespread, and not limited to any one geographic area. At the same time, the popularity of bars, sex clubs, and bathhouses has not diminished, suggesting that the Internet may be contributing to an overall increase in sexual activity among MSM. In addition, increasing evidence also confirms that other populations such as youth, women, transgender individuals, and couples seeking couples use the Internet for connecting with sex partners. On a larger scale, the Internet is used to advertise or promote sex parties, circuit parties, "raves," public or commercial sex venues, and local prostitution.

Online sex venues include chat rooms, bulletin boards, and more private communications such as electronic mail and text- or instant-messaging. Some web sites are organized for the specific purpose of facilitating unprotected anal sex or other behaviors that put people at risk for STD/HIV. Often, partnerships formed online are one-time, anonymous sexual encounters, presenting challenges for partner elicitation, notification, and treatment efforts.

Adapting current disease-control and health-promotion activities to the Internet environment is a critical step for public health agencies. The National Coalition of STD Directors (NCSD) is conducting a needs assessment to identify barriers to the implementation of Internet-based STD/HIV prevention and is developing a compendium of Internet protocols and procedures from their constituent program areas and partners. Both the needs assessment and the compendium will be the basis for consultation meetings aimed at generating guidance for the conduct of STD/HIV prevention on the Internet. As online prevention programs are initiated, it will be important to incorporate both process and outcome evaluation plans.

As this technology continues to evolve, it is clear that STD/HIV prevention programs must also evolve. Given the continued high rates of multiple STD among MSM, it is particularly important to focus online disease-prevention and health-promotion efforts on this population. Some early efforts to implement online partner notification and outreach have shown promise, though few have been evaluated rigorously. Some promising, Internet-based, programmatic efforts are described below.

Partner Services

At the most basic level, the Internet is useful for finding locating information (i.e., physical and e-mail addresses, phone numbers) for partners of clients infected with STD/HIV. More extensive efforts to notify Internet partners of STD-infected clients have been implemented by STD programs, notably in Minnesota, Houston, Chicago, and San Francisco. These efforts have shown promise in that staff have been able to locate, notify, test and treat some partners. Written protocols for Internet-based partner notification also exist in Florida and in Pennsylvania. (Please see the bibliography for a list of in-depth articles on these topics.)

Outreach

Online health promotion often takes the form of outreach in chat rooms. Efforts to reach crystal methamphetamine users via this medium have been implemented in South Florida, while a project in New York has trained sex workers to be online peer educators. Both chat-room outreach and auditorium-style "Ask the expert" sessions have been conducted in San Francisco. In Houston, Project CORE focuses on cyber-outreach.

Online health promotion can be more passive in nature; for example, many STD/HIV programs now have web sites with links to health information and lists of places to get tested. Banner advertising has been used to increase visits to some health department or community based organization (CBO) web sites. Cutting-edge efforts in San Francisco include the online distribution of lab orders for syphilis tests, as well as an online, automated, partner-notification program called InSpot.

Some program areas have benefited from consultation and collaboration with web site owners or with Internet Service Providers (ISP). Some ISPs have been willing to work with public health organizations to allow partner notification and outreach on their web sites. Other organizations have had success with individual efforts involving web sites and ISP.

What you can do

We encourage you to explore the contribution of the Internet to local epidemiology by (1) systematically identifying, during case interviews, venues where patients meet sex partners, and (2) exploring Internet-based STD/HIV prevention using methods described in this letter, or other innovative programs.

Until the Internet Compendium is available, we encourage you to explore these pioneering efforts and the constellation of possible programs made available by the Internet. CDC can provide technical assistance; to obtain such assistance, please contact Mary McFarlane, PhD (MMcFarlane@cdc.gov).

Sincerely,



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