

Syphilis Rates On Rise Again

Syphilis rates rose again in 2007, largely reflecting outbreaks among men who have sex with men, the nation's public health agency said in March 2008.

The news dampens hopes of eliminating the ancient sexually transmitted disease (STD), which in 2000 looked close to eradication in the United States.

"STDs remain a major threat to the health of gay and bisexual men, in part because having an STD other than HIV can increase the risk of transmitting or acquiring HIV," said Dr. Kevin Fenton, director of the Centers on Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD and TB Prevention.

"The resurgence of syphilis among MSM [men who have sex with men] represents a formidable challenge to our STD prevention efforts, but one that is surmountable," Dr. Fenton said at the agency's STD prevention conference in Chicago.

Screening and treatment should be a central part of medical care for gay and bisexual men, as well as finding innovative ways to help them avoid STD infections, including HIV, in the first place, he said.

Based on preliminary data, the 2007 syphilis rate was 3.7 cases per 100,000 population, or 11,181 cases. It was the seventh increase in a row and pushed rates 76 percent higher than in 2000, when the rate was 2.1 cases per 100,000. (Source: *The Washington Times*, March 13, 2008.)

Australia Report Predicts Upsurge In HIV Infections

A new report published by the National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research predicts that HIV infection rates will increase by 75% in the next seven years in Queensland if current trends continue. The study found that an increase in risky unprotected sex and the rise in sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) was likely behind the increase in HIV transmissions among gay men seen since 1999.

According to Dr. David Wilson, "While the raw numbers are not as large as they were at the peak of the HIV/AIDS crisis in 1988, this is a worrying trend." Sexually-transmitted diseases such as chlamydia, syphilis, and gonorrhea appear to be major factors in the increasing spread of HIV.

One in three such infections was transmitted by the 13% of men who had undiagnosed HIV. In addition, one in five transmissions

among gay men were attributable to the three percent of men who had been recently infected.

The number of infections dropped 30% in the 1990s and climbed back up between 2000 and 2006. (Source: AAP General News, Australia, March 3, 2008.)

'Versatility' In Same-Sex Intercourse Spreads HIV in Peru

"Role Versatility among Men Who have Sex with Men in Urban Peru," (*The Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 44, Issue 3, 2007) analyzed the sex practices of more than 2,000 Peruvian men who engage in same-sex intercourse.

The study was designed to discover the extent to which Men Who Have Sex With Men (MSM) vary their sex roles during anal intercourse. Three roles were studied: passive, insertive and versatile (the man would switch between passive and insertive during intercourse).

The study noted, "given the differences in transmissibility [of HIV] for insertive and receptive anal sex, such men are capable of both becoming infected efficiently while receptive and then transmitting efficiently while insertive."

Subjects were recruited from six large cities in Peru and received risk reduction counseling, condoms and lubricants.

They underwent a structured interview using Computer-Assisted Self-Interviewing (CASI) to determine their sex habits with other men and women.

The study found that 10.3% of those interviewed viewed themselves as heterosexuals. In addition, 16% of all those interviewed engaged in versatile behaviors. "Behavioral bisexuality is common among these men; 35% reported a female partner among their most recent three partners in the last three months."

Researchers discovered that "men who are exclusively receptive during UAI (unprotected anal intercourse) with male partners have a higher prevalence of HIV infection (16.6%) than either versatile (12.9%) or insertive (6.5%) men."

"We find that an individual man who is always insertive during UAI with other men is potentially exposing more women to HIV than is a man who is either receptive or versatile."

They conclude with this suggestion: "...it is clear that stronger messages are called for on the high indirect risk to a man's wife, girlfriend, or other female partners when he engaged in unprotected insertive anal sex with men."