

Training HIV Counselors about MSM in Vietnam

Tran VA Phuong¹, Donn J Colby², Deborah Bain-Brickley³, Tran Thinh¹, Nguyen V Trung⁴, Jeffrey S Mandel³

1. Ho Chi Minh City Provincial AIDS Committee, Vietnam

2. Vietnam-CDC-Harvard AIDS Partnership (VCHAP), Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

3. Center for AIDS Prevention Studies/Institute for Global Health, University of California, San Francisco, USA

4. Nguyen Friendship Society, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Issues

Men who have sex with men (MSM) represent a group at high risk of HIV infection, but have received little attention in Vietnam. Few health professionals and counselors have received any training about homosexuality; consequently most have no experience counseling MSM on sexual risk behaviors.

The prevalence of HIV infection among MSM in Ho Chi Minh City is estimated at 8%, as determined by research performed by the National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology in 2004. At the Anonymous HIV Testing Site (ATS) in Ho Chi Minh City, about 4% of all male clients report homosexual behavior; HIV prevalence among MSM at the ATS over the last three years was 19%.



HIV counselor training course at the ATS

Results

- This course was the first professional training about homosexuality ever received by most health care workers and counselors and their first opportunity to talk openly with self-identified MSM.
- Trainees are interested in learning more about homosexuality and engage in lively discussions with the MSM peer educators.
- MSM peer educators actively participate in training for health care professionals and HIV testing counselors.
- The sessions have been rated highly in the trainees' course evaluations.
- Counselors report feeling more comfortable discussing homosexuality, including asking questions about male-male sexual behavior in their sexual history taking and in counseling MSM in their work place.



MSM lecture for HIV counselors

Projects

The Anonymous HIV Testing Site (ATS) in Ho Chi Minh City offers a 6-day training course for HIV test counselors. The course includes two hours of lectures on MSM and HIV risk. Data on MSM in Vietnam is presented and skills for HIV counseling and risk reduction are reviewed. There is also a participatory exercise about stigma and discrimination toward MSM. Finally, there is a 60 minute session for discussion between the trainees and Vietnamese MSM peer educators.

Through May of 2005, 25 training courses have been held at the ATS and local hospitals, with a total of 563 counselor trainees completing the course. Counselor trainees include health care workers, government officials, police, social workers, and counselors.



Training MSM peer educators in Vietnam

Lessons learned

- Because of lack of training and experience, most health care professionals in Vietnam do not feel comfortable in taking sexual histories.
- Because of stigma and discomfort, many HIV testing counselors do not ask their male clients about homosexual behavior.
- In Vietnam, the public and health care profession do not have adequate knowledge about the risk for HIV infection among MSM.
- Many MSM are reluctant to undergo HIV testing and counseling, in part because of fear of revealing their sexual orientation and in part because of fear of facing discrimination from the health care system.

Recommendations

- HIV testing counselors should ask all male clients about homosexual behavior.
- Counselors in Vietnam must be prepared to offer risk reduction counseling to male clients who report male-male sexual behavior.
- Specific sessions on counseling MSM should be offered to all new HIV test counselors and in follow-up trainings in Vietnam.



MSM peer educator being interviewed for local TV in Nha Trang Vietnam

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