

Prevention, care and treatment of positive MSM in Thailand



Thailand has long been regarded as a world leader in the response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This response has required multi-sectorial collaboration and input from various NGOs, government, UN departments, PLWHA themselves, civil society and the public. In 2003, the national adult prevalence rate fell to 1.5%, the lowest level since the beginning of the epidemic in the early 90s.

In contrast the HIV prevalence in Thai MSM increased dramatically over the same time period. A study by a collaboration between Thai MOPH and the US-CDC in 2003 found a HIV prevalence rate of 17% in MSM in Bangkok. This rose to 28% in 2005. Many reasons have been proposed for this alarming increase.

- a lack of prevention programs that target MSM
 - a lack of understanding in MSM about their vulnerability to HIV
 - a lack of understanding in health professionals about MSM lifestyles and prevention needs
 - lack of self esteem and safe sex negotiating skills in some MSM
- In 2004, MSF- Belgium in partnership with TNP+ and AIDS ACCESS Foundation initiated a pilot project to address the lack of prevention and care and treatment services sensitive to MSM needs.

Aim of project

Many MSM reported a reluctance to access health care due to doubts about the existence of MSM friendly services that adequately met their needs and a fear of discrimination. Many also failed to see a need to inform themselves about their sexual health as previously it had never been a priority. This project aimed to educate hospital staff and PLWHA about MSM lifestyles to improve attitudes towards MSM, to decrease discrimination and to make mainstream health care services more acceptable to MSM. It also aimed to promote self esteem in MSM and to equip them with information about HIV prevention in an attempt to curb the rise in HIV infections among MSM.

Description:

The project utilised PLWHA and MSM peer educators to promote safe sex amongst MSM via a condom and lube campaign and provided self esteem training to local MSM.

A team of trainers made up of staff from MSF-B, AIDS ACCESS Foundation and TNP+ provided training to PLWHA groups and hospital staff in the Ratchaburi province, 80km west of Bangkok on

- sexual diversity
- safe sex and sexual health
- MSM lifestyles
- Attitude training and counseling

The team of trainers provided ongoing support and feedback to the MSM peer educators and PLWHA and helped build their capacity as trainers and mentors.

Lessons learnt

A MSM friendly service is necessary to enable MSM to access health care services especially in a HIV context. Training for health care providers should not only include information about MSM lifestyles but needs to incorporate sensitivity and attitude training in an attempt to understand the issues facing MSM. Basic counseling skills, understanding and sensitisation to sexual diversity can lead to a more user friendly medical service for MSM and the public as a whole. A comprehensive medical service should attend to all aspects of one's health including one's emotional and mental health as well as their physical health.

