

Are we drowning in the second wave?



MenTalk volunteers at their own MenTalk meeting. Roger Schroeder is at the top center.

Despite an array of outreach efforts, risk-taking behaviors among gay male communities are on the rise

Story by Inga Sorensen • Photos by Linda Kliever

Data from an ongoing study involving 1,600 Portland men who identify as gay or bisexual show up to 30 percent are engaging in extremely high-risk sex on a regular basis—this despite the millions of dollars that have been poured into safe-sex education campaigns that clearly tell them if they have unprotected sex, they and their partners could die.

"Despite all of our prevention efforts, studies indicate there is enough sexual risk-taking going on to reproduce the AIDS epidemic generation after generation," says Ron Stall, an associate professor of epidemiology with the University of California at San Francisco. With funding from the National Institute of Mental Health, Stall has been tracking trends in sexual risk-taking behaviors among gay and bisexual men in Portland and Tucson, Ariz.

"There isn't a cure for AIDS, and the best thing we can do to protect ourselves is to practice safe sex all the time," he says. "It's very difficult because we are human, but, at this point, it's all we have."

It's been roughly 15 years since the AIDS epidemic began in the United States. Tens of thousands of gay men have died of complications from the disease, which ravages the immune system, thousands more will continue to die each year. Three thousand Oregonians have died of AIDS; gay men account for an estimated 80 percent of those deaths.

Yet researchers are finding that neither that painful reality nor an explicit safe-sex campaign are deterring large numbers of men from engaging in high-risk sex. Though many, if not most, men who identify as gay or bisexual say they have been exposed to some type of HIV-prevention material—a brochure, billboard or poster, for instance—numerous studies show that population appears to be involved in risky sexual practices at higher rates in the mid-1990s than it was in the late-1980s.

Stall is in the fourth year of his five-year study involving 2,600 men: 1,600 from Portland and 1,000 from Tucson. He selected the two cities because he found them "more representative of America, unlike a New York City or a San Francisco." He found his subjects by going to various

gay bars around town and through a random telephone survey. Of the Portland segment, 1,200 are part of the "bar sample"; the remaining 400 comprise the telephone or "household sample." The samples consist of both men who claim they are seropositive and those who say they are seronegative. (Stall estimates 40 percent of gay men in Portland don't actually know their status because they have never been tested or they have had unsafe sex since their last test.) Stall, who has been tracking his subjects since 1992, interviews the men via telephone or mail survey on an annual basis. He questions them about their sexual practices. If the men say they are HIV-positive, Stall asks them about the type of health care they are accessing.

"What we found the first year is that one in three men in the bar sample said they had engaged in unprotected anal sex with a nonmonogamous partner during the past month. For the household sample, it was about one in six," explains Stall, who was in Portland last month to share his most recent findings with the Cascade AIDS Project, Oregon's largest AIDS service organization.

"Results of three years of interviews with these men show that the rate—one in three for the bar sample and one in six for the household sample—has remained steady," he says.

It is also important to remember that for the purposes of his study Stall has defined high-risk sex perhaps in the most extreme context possible: unprotected anal sex with a nonmonogamous partner within the past month. Other sexual practices—including oral sex without a condom—may increase one's chances of contracting HIV. Thus, one could surmise that even greater levels of men are partaking in some form of risky behavior.

"What's also very disturbing is that compared to much of the nation, Portland has a nationally recognized CBO [community-based organization—in this case, CAP] that has been conducting community outreach around HIV/AIDS issues for years," Stall says. "It makes me wonder what's going on in places that don't have established CBOs or an organized gay community."

Even areas that have been saturated with "play

Continued on next page