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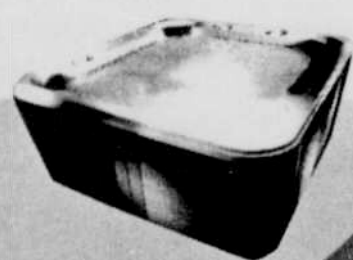
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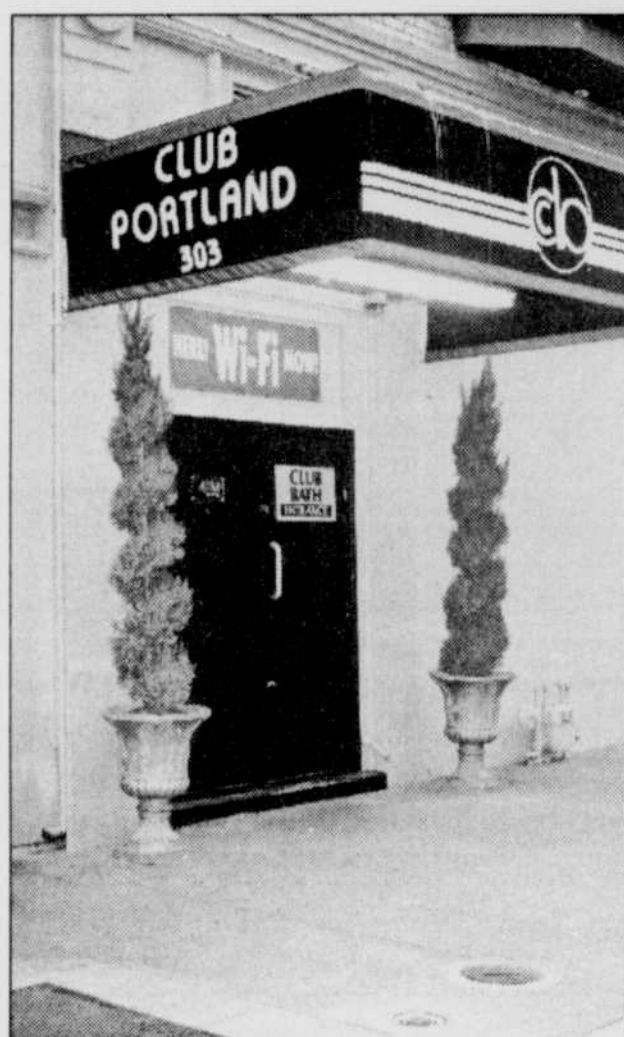
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WWW.ORHOTSPRINGSPAS.COM**NORTHWESTnews****THE PARTY'S OVER****CAP calls for regulation of sex clubs to curb alarming rise in syphilis,
gonorrhea and HIV among queer men** by Bart Church

The owners of Club Portland and Steam Portland are eager to come up with new voluntary but tough measures for communicating zero tolerance for barebacking and drug use

Frustrated by an alarming rise in barebacking, a doubling of syphilis cases in the past year and a significant increase in gonorrhea, Cascade AIDS Project has called on the Multnomah County Health Department to consider regulating commercial sex establishments so they will get more serious about promoting safer sex.

"Safer sex has become the exception and not the norm in sex clubs and online hookups," says Philip Knowlton, CAP men's prevention and wellness coordinator. "I can't tell you how frustrating it is for me to watch 30 to 40 guys barebacking at Club Portland and not be able to do anything about it, or to go online and see a majority of the guys in a chat room looking for barebacking. I don't know if gay men are going to be able to change these norms without some pressure from the health department. I'm not saying close down the clubs or send in the sex police, but I am saying we all have to get serious about stopping barebacking in public spaces and promoting safer sex. We've run out of ideas, and what we're doing now isn't working."

Knowlton has grounds to be concerned. Syphilis was basically eradicated in Oregon during the early '80s but re-emerged among gay men in 2001 with four cases and grew to 20 cases in 2002; last year saw at least 46 cases. Gonorrhea also has grown steadily from 83 cases in 1998 to 254 cases in 2003, as of Dec. 15. A recent large study of sexual behavior among MSM (men who have sex with men) by the Oregon Department of Human Services indicates why there has been such a steep increase in sexually transmitted diseases:

- Half report barebacking during their last anal sex encounter, and 52 percent report they sometimes used condoms and sometimes barebacked in the past two months. (Only one-third report they always used a condom in the past two months.)

- About 30 percent did not know the HIV

status of their partner in their last anal sex encounter.

- About 61 percent agreed with the statement "Because of new HIV treatments, men who have sex with men are less worried about AIDS and HIV."

Because Portland has the sixth fastest-growing syphilis epidemic in the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention came to the Rose City last year to conduct a special study with the Multnomah County Health Department of what's causing the outbreak. They found almost all of the new cases are among MSM and, of these cases:

- About 75 percent are older than 30.
- About 90 percent are white.
- At least 50 percent are HIV-positive.
- Most report multiple sex partners.
- Almost all report mostly anonymous partners.

This last phenomenon is allowing syphilis and gonorrhea to spread like wildfire. The long incubation period for syphilis means people who don't know they're infected continue to spread the disease. When HIV-positive men get syphilis, because of their compromised immune system they often rapidly progress to an advanced stage called "neuro-syphilis," which can cause paralysis, numbness, gradual blindness, neuropathy and dementia. Most disturbing of all, syphilis greatly increases the likelihood that someone will receive or transmit HIV because it damages tissue in the mouth and rectum.

Syphilis is much easier to get than HIV and is spread through contact with a sore in the mouth, anus or penis of an infected person. Unfortunately, the initial sores are usually painless and may not be noticed at all in the mouth or anus. While health officials have not proven the link, they are concerned that barebacking is to blame for the local increases in syphilis and gonorrhea during the past two years. They do know that many U.S. cities that saw a spike in

**"Barebacking is
nothing more
than unlicensed
assisted suicide"**

—Richard Lawson