

NORTHWEST news

syphilis about four years ago are now experiencing more new HIV infections.

"If Portland follows the pattern of other cities, we would expect to see a significant increase in new HIV cases in Oregon in the next two years," says Mitch Zahn, a gay man who works as HIV prevention manager for the Oregon Department of Human Services. Unfortunately, his office—the largest funder of STD prevention efforts in the state—will have an estimated 10 percent less money in 2004 because of budget cuts.



Mitch Zahn predicts Portland's spike in syphilis will lead to more HIV cases

"The grim reality is that government alone is not going to be able to prevent HIV or STDs," says Doug Moon, a gay man who coordinated the state's study of sexual behavior among MSM. "The gay community, as they did when AIDS started, is going to have to respond with education, advocacy and a robust conversation about what our sexual norms need to be and what we need to do to stay healthy."

The public health officer of Multnomah County agrees.

"I do not believe the health department currently has the authority to regulate commercial sex establishments," Dr. Gary Oxman says. "We could seek that authority, but I'm not convinced regulation is the best place to start. There are many ways we can work with commercial sex establishments to develop voluntary standards for promoting safer sex and preventing barebacking. The key is setting clear standards and assuring businesses are accountable. The decision of whether to use a regulatory or voluntary approach should be made with involvement of the gay community."

Oxman would like queers to contact him with their suggestions of practical ways the health department might help the gay community re-establish safer sex norms and prevent barebacking. Call 503-988-4454 or e-mail mchealth.msm@co.multnomah.or.us.

For their part, the owners of Portland's two largest sex clubs serving gay men are eager to work with Oxman to come up with new voluntary but tough measures for communicating zero tolerance for barebacking and drug use as well as much more effective ways of promoting safer sex and HIV/STD testing.

"I am willing to contact the owners of all the sex clubs in Portland to invite them to a meeting with Dr. Oxman sometime in the month of January to come up with a set of voluntary guidelines," says David Anderson, the owner of Steam Portland. "I'm also willing to contact the owners of all the gay bars to meet with Dr. Oxman about how they can be more aggressive in promoting safer sex and HIV/STD testing in the bars. People are drinking and hooking up in bars, and they need to be reminded in fresh and effective ways about the importance of safer sex and testing. Sex clubs are not the only, or even the main, place people go to find unsafe sex."

"We can't rely on the government to change our cultural norms," Anderson adds. "We have to do this ourselves. We are not just business owners; we are also citizens who care about our community. We need to sharpen and coordinate the messages we're giving in our establishments about safer sex and testing."

Club Portland wants all commercial sex establishments to enforce no-barebacking policies and actively promote safer sex and testing, so that barebackers don't just play a shell game and move their activities to other clubs. But owner Richard Lawson won't wait for a consensus to implement tougher measures.

"Club Portland has re-examined its need to influence personal perceptions in the matter of safer sex issues and has and will be taking a more aggressive stand against high-risk public sexual activity," he says. "We plan to actively enforce our ban on barebacking rather than rely on some form of honor system and by increasing casual surveillance and using diplomatic interdiction when necessary to make the point we have, and enforce, a no-tolerance policy.... We care about the health and wellness of

each member and plan on giving them all the practical assistance possible to make safer sex the norm rather than a forgotten option."

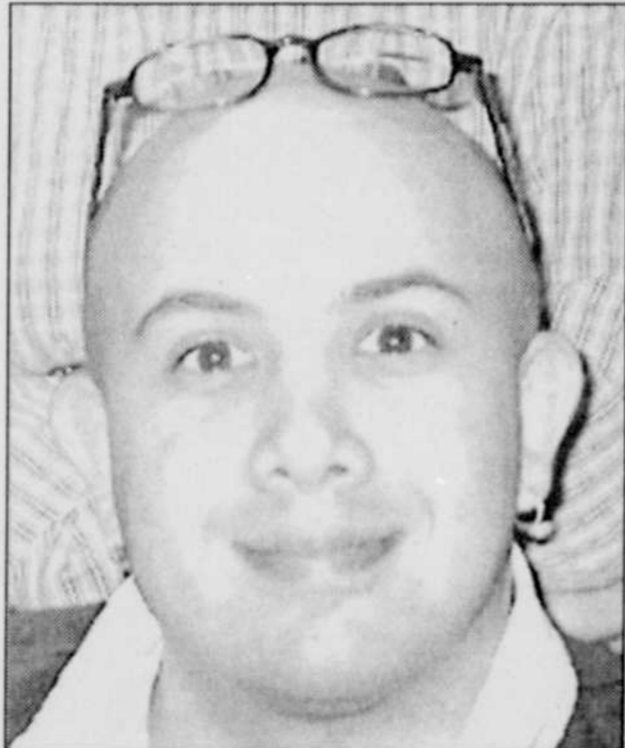
Lawson promises employees will remind clubgoers about the anti-barebacking policy with periodic announcements on the public address system.

"In a sincere effort to keep the gospel of safer sex alive, its promotion must be a massive group effort—not the sole responsibility of a single entity," he says. "We must think outside the box for innovative new ways to interdict and convince the gay male risk-taker that barebacking is nothing more than unlicensed assisted suicide."

Moon says: "While it's great the clubs and bars are getting more involved in HIV/STD prevention, individual gay men who are reading this article need to get a lot more involved if we are going to have any hope of re-establishing safer sex norms in chat rooms, bars, sex clubs, beaches and all the other places gay men go to find sex. If you want sex in Portland, you can find it within 30 minutes. Our health department can't and doesn't want to regulate all the ways you can find sex. We gay men have got to change our values and norms. If queer men don't make HIV and STD prevention a priority like we did at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, our community may be engulfed by a tidal wave of new epidemics that will devastate not just individual lives, but our whole community." □

NEXT ISSUE: The Jan. 23 edition of Just Out will outline 10 ways gay men can protect their health and help change sexual norms in erotic/social venues.

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Philip Knowlton wonders whether gay men can stop barebacking without some pressure from the health department



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