

"Rise of Internet Fuels Fears of AIDS Resurgence"

Reuters (07.29.03)::Paul Simao

Today in Atlanta, two new studies presented at the 2003 National HIV Prevention Conference noted that online chatrooms and Web sites are replacing gay bathhouses and sex clubs as the most popular meeting points for arranging high-risk sex. The findings come amid growing evidence of an apparent resurgence of HIV and syphilis in men who have sex with men. New HIV diagnoses among gay and bisexual men have jumped more than 17 percent since 1999, CDC reported this week.

"It's clear we need to reach gay and bisexual men with appropriate messages, not only in traditional high-risk settings but also online," said Dr. Ron Valdiserri, deputy director of CDC's National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention.

A California Department of Health Services survey showed 23 percent of gay and bisexual men with syphilis admitting having met sexual partners on the Internet. Twenty-one percent had met partners in bathhouses.

A study by the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies at the University of California-San Francisco interviewed gay and bisexual males online. Thirty-nine percent of the interview subjects admitted having unprotected anal sex with someone they had met on the Internet during the previous two months.

And yet, the Internet can also be a tool to deliver HIV prevention and safe sex messages to high-risk groups. AIDS experts have reported success raising HIV and STD prevention issues with gay and bisexual males online, using banner ads, one-on-one outreach sessions and chatroom discussions on Web sites.

Educators say the anonymity of the Internet allows them to address issues some might feel reluctant to discuss in clinics. They also cite a need to increase HIV awareness among minority groups and teenagers.

Research presented at the conference showed about 20 percent of blacks and Latinos were unaware that antiretroviral drugs had revolutionized the AIDS fight since the early 1990s. "Information about these treatments must be communicated more effectively...", said Valerie Mills, associate administrator for HIV/AIDS at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.