

August 18, 2005

A Good Report on AIDS, and Some Credit the Web

By **DEAN E. MURPHY**

SAN FRANCISCO, Aug. 17 - The conversation over tossed salad, dinner rolls and iced tea was about dating. Mostly predictable stuff, like where to meet guys and the hottest men-seeking-men Web sites.

But the gathering last week at a coffee shop in the largely gay Castro district here was not a casual pickup session. The dozen or so men were infected with the virus that causes **AIDS**, and the talk was of "responsible sex," not through condoms, necessarily, but through choosing sex partners who are already infected.

"I don't think I could sleep at night if I knew I had infected another human being," said one of the men, Don Stewart, who tested positive for the virus, H.I.V., five years ago.

The monthly social event, called Positive Space and organized by an AIDS prevention group, is among the scores of educational meetings, workshops, seminars and parties that health officials here say may be contributing to a significant decline in the incidence of H.I.V. among gay men in San Francisco.

The national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated in a report in June that new infections in San Francisco among men who have sex with men were occurring at about half the rate previously calculated by city health officials - 1.2 percent a year instead of 2.2 percent. That is the lowest rate reported in San Francisco since 1997 and the lowest among five cities with significant gay populations studied by the disease control agency.

Since the report's release, health officials here, known for their cautious approach to shifts in AIDS trends, have been scrambling to confirm the results and offer an explanation. Some officials have said that the decline has been fueled by conventional efforts like stepped-up H.I.V. treatment programs, easier and more regular tests, and so-called harm-reduction strategies like discouraging the use of crystal methamphetamine, a drug blamed for helping to spread the disease by lowering inhibitions.

But other signs, like the proliferation of matchmaking Web sites for men infected with H.I.V. and the relatively high number of men here who know their H.I.V. status, point to a growth in the number of men looking for partners with the same status. The practice is known as sero-sorting, which involves men choosing sex partners based on their common serostatus, a term that refers to the presence of antibodies to a particular infectious agent in the blood.

"Studies have shown when people have knowledge of their sero-status, they take that knowledge and use it to protect their partners," said Dr. Patrick S. Sullivan, chief of the behavioral and clinical surveillance branch at the disease control centers. "Sero-sorting is one piece of that whole benefit that arises from people learning their status through H.I.V. testing."

Since the AIDS epidemic began nearly 25 years ago, San Francisco has often been a laboratory of

sorts, with many behavioral changes, both good and bad, occurring here before spreading to other cities.

Though the disease control centers' report is just one in a sea of statistical analyses and studies about H.I.V., containing the usual caveats about possible reporting errors and potentially skewed sampling, the emerging consensus in San Francisco is that the new numbers signal a reversal in a sharp rise in infections that began about seven years ago.

The highest incidence of new infection among men who have sex with men, 8 percent, was found in Baltimore, followed by Miami with 2.6 percent, New York with 2.3 percent and Los Angeles with 1.4 percent, according to the report's preliminary estimates, which were based on H.I.V. tests conducted among 1,767 men from June 2004 to April 2005.

"When I first saw the data, I was skeptical and had to be convinced," said Jeff Sheehy, an adviser on AIDS issues to Mayor Gavin Newsom of San Francisco. "There's a lot of fortunate events coming together to drive this. It's incredibly important to start people really looking at the factors driving the downward trend and reinforce and encourage those factors."

The federal report did not delve into possible causes, and there is no specific evidence to support any definitive conclusion. Dr. Sullivan said that the report was a "snapshot in time," and that there would not be directly comparable data available until another survey was conducted in 2007.

He said there was a variety of possible contributors to the lower incidence of infection in San Francisco. But some of the men gathered at the coffee shop in the Castro, the H-Cafe, suggested that sero-sorting - while imperfect because it relies on men being truthful about their H.I.V. status and gives some an excuse to avoid using condoms - was among the most important reasons for the decline.

"I very rarely date a negative person," said Stan Pugh, a massage therapist who said he had been H.I.V. positive since the early 1980's. "If I do, it is only safe sex. But when you have two positives together, we tend to have sex any way we want to."

The surge in recent years in men turning to the Internet to find casual sex partners has made sero-sorting easier. Web dating often eliminates the awkward and too often skipped face-to-face discussion just before sexual relations about who is infected with what.

"Everything is going well and you dread finding the right moment to come out with that," said Matt Kennedy, who tested positive for H.I.V. a year ago and who works for the Stop AIDS Project, the nonprofit group that organizes the meetings at the H-Cafe.

Matchmaking Web sites for men who are H.I.V. positive have flourished, and many personal ads on more general sites, like [Craigslist.com](http://www.craigslist.com), also include details and demands from prospective sex partners about H.I.V. status.

In the shorthand of the sexually explicit personals, "POZ UB2" indicates a man who is H.I.V. positive seeking the same. In a recent Craigslist item under the headline "Long Party Sessions Wanted," one San Francisco man asked to meet "sometime today" and posted his age, height, hair and eye colors, and the message "neg (u2 plz)."

Though San Francisco has a high percentage of men who are H.I.V. positive - about a quarter of the

roughly 60,000 gay men here, according to city estimates - health officials said sero-sorting was easier here than in many other cities because the men were relatively well informed about their status. The disease control centers estimated in June that 77 percent of the city's infected men knew they were infected, compared with estimates of 48 percent in New York and 38 percent in Baltimore.

J. Jeff McConnell, who directs a study of about 300 people who are H.I.V. positive at the Gladstone Institute of Virology and Immunology at the University of California, San Francisco, said recent data showed that sero-sorting patterns were "becoming stronger" among the study's gay participants.

Data from three recent months showed that the 176 gay participants engaged in 5,500 acts of sexual intercourse with other men, with about 80 percent of the acts occurring with men known to be H.I.V. positive.

Despite concerns that the Internet facilitates high-risk sex, Mr. McConnell said, "Ultimately, sex that occurs from the Internet is no more risky than sex from any other venues because of sero-sorting."

Yet there are drawbacks. Herb Topping, another of the H-cafe patrons, said that many men who are H.I.V. positive worried about the possibility of becoming infected with a new strain of the virus. Mr. Topping said he insisted on safe-sex practices, like use of condoms, even when having sex with a positive partner, but that other worried positive men seek out willing negative partners.

"I think that is a struggle in the community right now," said Mr. Topping, who tested positive for H.I.V. five years ago.

Health officials recommend safe-sex practices regardless of the partner. But Dr. Jeffrey D. Klausner, who oversees sexually transmitted disease prevention at the San Francisco Department of Public Health, said worries about acquiring a second strain were mostly unfounded.

Dr. Klausner said research had shown that the risk was low, particularly after the first year or two of infection, and paled in comparison with the risks associated with men who are H.I.V. positive having sex with men who are not.

"From a public health perspective," he said, "it is much more important that people have sexual contacts of the same status."

Though it will take months for health officials to come up with firm numbers of their own, preliminary reviews of some data collected at city health clinics and in surveys by the Stop AIDS Project indicate a trend similar to that reported by the disease control centers.

Moreover, statistics released last week on syphilis, which researchers say often tracks closely with H.I.V., show that the number of new infections in San Francisco dropped 27 percent in the first six months of this year, the first decline since 1998.

"We interpret this C.D.C. report as good news, and there are some other encouraging trends and results of other studies," Dr. Willi McFarland, director of the H.I.V. seroepidemiology unit at the San Francisco health department, said in an e-mail message. "But we definitely do need to corroborate and independently confirm any decrease in H.I.V. incidence by carefully examining other data. We also need to figure out if this is true, then why."

Carol Pogash contributed reporting for this article.

[Copyright 2005 The New York Times Company](#) | [Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [XML](#) | [I](#)

AUGUST 19, 2005
7:23 PM

GREAT AMBITION AND CONQUEST, WITHOUT CONTRIBUTION,
IS WITHOUT SIGNIFICANCE.