

Piloting the uptake of a rapid Syphilis kit in Edinburgh

Introduction

ROAM Outreach is part of NHS Lothian's Harm Reduction Team (HRT) and Substance Misuse Directorate (SMD). It offers a wide range of services for men who have sex with men (MSM) in public sex environments (PSEs) and for men engaged in the sex industry.

In October 2008 the Lothian NHS syphilis action group held their annual outbreak control meeting. What had initially been regarded as an outbreak was now deemed endemic syphilis infection within MSM groups and new interventions were required. An action plan was suggested to target this group which should be cost effective given the current endemic status of syphilis infection. ROAM Outreach was highlighted as a service that currently had access to the identified target group. The syphilis action group were aware that a previous initiative in Greater Glasgow had involved syphilis near patient testing (NPT) within community gay venues. It was proposed that a pilot study could be developed by ROAM in an attempt to access these groups within both the saunas and PSEs.

Pilot Aims

- To increase the uptake of syphilis NPT within the hard to reach MSM client group in Edinburgh saunas
- Attempt to break down perceived barriers to myths about testing services available and increase the uptake of full sexual health screening

Pilot Objectives

- Develop testing protocols and clinical governance guidelines
- Deliver a 24 week near patient testing service for syphilis in PSE's
- Develop patient pathways with GUM services
- Produce evaluation report

Results

Table 2 Number of syphilis NPT carried out at the individual saunas with results obtained.

Location	Number of tests	Negative Result	Indicative of a positive result
No.18 sauna	43	41	2
Steamworks	20	19	1
'The bus'	0	0	0
Totals	63	60	3

The three positive results were confirmed by GUM as being; (1) a previously undiagnosed late syphilis, (2) previously undiagnosed inactive syphilis, and (3) being a previously undiagnosed syphilis that had probably been incidentally treated at

some time before the syphilis NPT. The rate of infection (1 in 20) was higher than in the Glasgow study (1:40 of those tested within gay clubs and pubs).

Most clients (43%) indicated they had never been tested previously, with 16% reporting they had not been for sexual health screening in the last 2 years. The remaining 41% had been screened within the last 2 years.

Discussions

The results clearly demonstrate that the MSM target group was reached. A high percentage of those tested stated they had never been screened for sexually transmitted infections, including those that had not attended a clinic within the last 2 years. Although a large number did report attendance for regular screening, it remains a constant concern with the high level of sexual activity and multiple partner's characteristic of sauna attendees.

The pre-testing discussions and interactions within the saunas were deemed successful, though it was noted by both ROAM workers the apparent lack of knowledge clients displayed around sexually transmitted infections. This included lack of knowledge about protection and onward transmission. This is consistent with the high percentage of clients reporting not being tested on a regular basis and therefore not accessing specialised information sources. Interestingly the study identified a significant increase (over 75%) of clients accessing the ROAM sauna sessions following introduction of the syphilis NPT. This increase may be due to the syphilis NPT being an avenue for clients to open discussions with ROAM staff. This allowed talks to ensue around additional topics of safer sex along with clients accessing condoms and lubricant. It was noted that a large percentage of those tested raised questions about other testing options that could be available. This suggests further explorations of testing options within saunas including HIV and other STI screening may be worthwhile and well received within this hard to reach client group.

The success of the pilot led on to securing funding to allow the syphilis NPT to be integrated into ROAM's work within both gay saunas. Since completing the pilot we have tested a further 122 patients of 18 were returns from the pilot.

Location	Number of tests	Negative Result	Indicative of a positive result
No.18 sauna	85	81	4
Steamworks	37	37	0
Totals	122	118	4

The four positive results were confirmed by GUM as being; 3 early latent untreated syphilis infection and 1 secondary untreated infection. It may be also worth noting during both the pilot and our current work to date there has been no false reactive and we continue to carry out point of care testing for syphilis as part of our core work.

Vaughan Statham
Blood Borne Virus Prevention Worker
ROAM Outreach Edinburgh