

HIV RISKS AMONG WOMEN IN CONTACT WITH SYDNEY'S GAY AND LESBIAN COMMUNITY

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Abstract

In February 1996, 585 women completed a survey questionnaire about HIV risk practices: 496 were recruited at the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Fair Day and a further 89 at other community venues and clinics. Twenty-seven respondents (5%) were transgender. In sexual orientation, 58% thought of themselves as lesbian/homosexual, 15% as bisexual, and 21% as heterosexual. Asked whether they had ever had sex with a gay or bisexual man, 159 women (26%) said they had; 42 women (7%) had done so in the past six months. About 1% of the lesbians said they had had sex with a gay or bisexual man in the past six months, as had 6% of the heterosexual women and 29% of the bisexual women. Twenty women (3%) had had unprotected vaginal or anal sex with a male gay or bisexual partner (regular or casual) in the past six months. Fifty-five women (9%) had done sex work in the past six months. Seventy-one women (12%) said they had injected drugs in the past six months. Forty women had injected drugs with a gay or bisexual man and eight had shared equipment. For a case of so-called 'heterosexual' transmission of HIV to occur, neither person need be heterosexual. Bisexual groups may be a useful locus in which to provide safe-sex information and support. Sterile needles and safe drug-using advice should be available through gay and lesbian health services as well as through mainstream services.

Introduction

HIV infection rates among women in Australia have remained low compared to those among men. Nonetheless, sex with a man remains the main risk for HIV transmission to women. During 1996, 58 women were newly diagnosed with HIV infection, 53 of them through sexual contact and three through injecting drug use.¹ Australia's AIDS-prevention policy is focused on high-risk groups such as inner-city gay men.² However, not all women are at equally low risk.

Both the Gay and Lesbian Injecting Drug Use Project (GLIDUP) and the Women Partners of Gay/Bisexual Men Project at the AIDS Council of NSW are accessed by women who are connected to Sydney's gay and lesbian communities. Some of these women report having sexual contact with and/or injecting drugs with gay or bisexual

men. Women also use GLIDUP's needle exchange services at major gay and lesbian parties. Reports on men in the gay community and their sex with women raise issues about women in contact with the gay community.³

Policy makers, research grant committees, health care practitioners and others often make the assumption that lesbians—or indeed all women involved with queer communities—by definition do not have sex with men. Lesbians have thus been seen as a very low-risk group with respect to HIV. We assume neither that all such women identify themselves as lesbians, nor that even those who do necessarily eschew sex with men. This study based on convenience sampling aimed to estimate risks to such women, to find out how better to target prevention campaigns.

Methods

A two-page self-completion questionnaire was developed on the model of the one used for the Sydney Gay Community Periodic Survey of men in Sydney's gay community.⁴⁻⁶ The new questionnaire asked women about HIV-related risk behaviours including drug use and sex with gay or bisexual men. (Copies are available from the corresponding author.)

In February 1996 the questionnaire was distributed to women attending the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Fair Day in Sydney and seven other gay/lesbian community venues and health services. Fair Day is attended by about 40,000 people. It is held in a harbourside park, with community information booths, market stalls, stage musical performances, a dog show and so on. Volunteer respondents were offered raffle tickets for a restaurant dinner for two in return for the completed questionnaires.

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Data were entered from the questionnaires into Microsoft Excel by ACON volunteers. The figures were cleaned and checked, and additional comments and answers to open-ended questions were recorded. The analysis presented here is primarily descriptive, with cross-tabs and *t*-tests to confirm significant differences between subgroups where appropriate.

Results

At Mardi Gras Fair Day, 496 women completed the survey. A further 89 were recruited at the other venues and clinics. Two thirds said that some, most or all of their friends were gay or homosexual men. In the past six months, 79% had attended a gay or lesbian bar or dance party; 96% had some social contact with gay men. Sixty per cent lived in inner or eastern Sydney, the areas generally associated with 'gay Sydney'. There were 27 transgender or transsexual respondents (4.6%); they differed significantly from the other women on only a few variables, which are noted below where relevant. We have referred to them as 'trannies', a term they use themselves and which has the advantage of avoiding a distinction between transsexual and transgender. In the sample as a whole, ages ranged from 16 to 63 and the median age was 31. This was a highly educated group: 72% had post-school qualifications.

Sexual orientation

The questionnaire asked, 'Do you think of yourself as: Lesbian/homosexual, Bisexual, Heterosexual, Other (please specify)'. Throughout this paper, when women are referred to as lesbian, bisexual etc., it is this self-description or identity that is being used. Over half the women described themselves as lesbian or homosexual (Table 1). Twenty women used some other term, such as 'queer', or resisted categorisation, writing 'a woman', 'sexual' or 'non-identified'. Transgender respondents were much more likely to choose the 'other' response and less likely to identify as lesbian. Women under 25 were more likely than older women to identify as bisexual and less likely to identify as lesbian.

Table 1: Stated sexual orientation

	Number	%
Lesbian/homosexual*	340	58.1
Bisexual	86	14.7
Heterosexual/straight	124	21.2
Other	20	3.4
No answer	15	2.6
Total	585	100.0

*including respondents who added 'gay', 'dyke' etc.

Sexual partners

Respondents were asked about sex with gay or bisexual men, with straight or heterosexual men and with women in the past six months. One woman in four (151 women; 25.8%) had had sex with a gay or bisexual man, and 42

(7.2% of the total group) had done so in the past six months. These women had usually had more than one such partner (25 of the 42 women, 59%) (see Table 2). Four lesbians (about 1%) reported that they had recently had sex with a gay or bisexual man, as did seven (6%) of the heterosexual women. Among the bisexual women, 25 (29%) had had sex with one or more gay or bisexual men in the past six months ($P < 0.001$).

Table 2: Number of gay or bisexual male sexual partners in the past six months, n = 585

Number of partners	Number	%
No answer/none	543	92.8
One	17	2.9
2-5	19	3.2
6-10	3	0.5
>10	3	0.5

Three hundred and fifty women (60%) had had sex with one or more heterosexual men. Of the lesbians, 45% had had sex with at least one straight man, as had 78% of the bisexual women and 86% of the straight women. Due to flaws in the question layout, accurate figures for the number of straight male partners in the previous six months are not available. The proportion of lesbians who had sex with a straight man did not appear to be accounted for by sex work, as only 11 of the 153 lesbian women who had had sex with a straight man reported having done sex work in the past six months.

Four hundred and twenty-two women (72%) reported that they had had sex with one or more women. Almost all the lesbians reported having had sex with at least one woman, as did 80% of the bisexual women, 63% of the women describing themselves as 'other' and 14% of the straight women.

Relationships with women and men

All respondents were asked to describe their current sexual relationships with women according to the categories in Table 3. The most common response (42%) was from women who were in a relationship with one woman and did not have casual sex with others. Of the women who were in a relationship with another woman, 90% described it as monogamous.

Table 3: Current sexual relationships with women (n = 585)

	Number	%
None at present	228	39.0
Casual sex only with women	61	10.4
Regular relationship plus casual sex with other women	26	4.4
Monogamous relationship (one woman only)	247	42.2
Other	4	0.7
No answer	19	3.2

The questionnaire asked respondents to fit their current sexual relationships with men into the categories listed in Table 4.

Table 4: Current sexual relationships with men

	Number	%
None at present	405	69.9
Casual sex only with men	45	8.2
Regular relationship plus I have casual sex with other men	16	2.7
Regular relationship plus he has casual sex with other men	6	1.0
Regular relationship plus both he and I have casual sex with other men	3	0.5
Monogamous relationship (one man only)	78	13.3
Other	15	1.4
No answer	17	2.9

Fifteen women gave other responses about their sexual relationships with men. Four said they never had sex with men, or were repulsed by them, and the other 11 women reported that either they or their partners (or both) had sex with other women, or men and women. Three said they did sex work with men but did not have relationships with them. Of the 585 respondents, 55 (9%) had been a sex worker at some time during the past six months. Eight of these were trannies.

Sexual practices with gay or bisexual men

Table 5 shows the sexual practices reported by the 42 women who had had sex with a gay or bisexual male partner (regular or casual). Of the seven trannies in this group, none had had vaginal intercourse.

Table 5: Women who had had sex with a gay/bi man: sexual acts practised occasionally or often with regular and casual partners (n = 42)

Practice	Number of women who have done this with a	
	regular partner	casual partner
Oral sex with ejaculation	18	8
Vaginal sex with condom	19	18
Vaginal without condom, no ejaculation	10	2
Vaginal without condom with ejaculation	15	4
Anal sex with condom	11 ^a	10 ^c
Anal without condom, no ejaculation	3	2
Anal without condom, with ejaculation	4	1
Total	29	23

^aIncluding 4 trannies.

^cIncluding 3 trannies.

Do these practices place women at potential risk? Twenty of the 42 women had had unprotected vaginal or anal sex with a regular or casual partner. 'Unprotected' sex is defined as intercourse without condoms, with or without ejaculation. Of these 20 respondents, six had unprotected vaginal or anal intercourse with a casual partner. Of the 14 who had unprotected sex only with a regular partner, three say that the relationship is monogamous. The data are missing in three cases, but there were at least eight women who seemed to be relying on their partners' safe practice with other men for their own protection. Over half of the women (22), said they had had sex with a gay/bi man while under the influence of drugs other than alcohol, most commonly marijuana and cocaine.

Drug use

Asked whether they had injected drugs in the past six months, 71 women (12%) said yes. Of the 89 respondents from the clinics and community venues, 31 (35%) had injected. Of the 496 Mardi Gras Fair Day respondents, 40 (8%) had injected. Injectors were largely confined to the under-35 age groups. Ten per cent of lesbians, 22% of bisexuals, 11% of heterosexuals and 14% of the other women had injected drugs. Twenty-eight of the 71 injectors (39%) had been a sex worker in the past six months, compared to 55 in the group as a whole (9%). Forty women had injected drugs with a gay/bi man, of whom 26 had also had sex with a gay/bi man. Eight had shared injecting equipment with a gay or bisexual man.

HIV and AIDS

A majority (65%) of the women surveyed had been tested for HIV. Of those who had been tested, five women (one of whom was a tranny), reported that they were HIV-positive.

Discussion

This study represents the first attempt at surveying women in contact with a gay and lesbian community in Australia in relation to HIV risks. As a way of reaching women in social contact with gay men it was extremely successful, as almost all respondents had at least some social contact with gay men. Most people select sexual partners from their social networks.⁷ The same is true of drug use.⁸ The differences between the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Fair Day respondents and those recruited at clinics and community venues underscore the advantage of using a community event that does not select people with health problems or special needs.

In age, area of residence and education level the women were roughly similar to the men responding to the Sydney Gay Community Periodic Survey. However, they differ strongly from the 61 women who responded to the 1993 Women Partners of Bisexual Men Phone-In, widely promoted in the mainstream media. Most of those women lived in northern Sydney or the NSW central coast, and a quarter of them were aged over 50.⁹

There is a tendency among some clinicians, the popular media and members of the general public to assume that lesbians are by definition 'women who do not have sex with men', and thus to disregard any possibility of their exposure to HIV or other sexually transmitted infections. Such an assumption equates epidemiological or behavioural categories with social identities and disregards the fact that women who identify as lesbians have often had sex with men in the past and may continue to do so intermittently or even frequently, just as some gay-identified men may have sex with women. In this survey, the fact that sexual behaviour, i.e. gender of partners in the past six months, correlated only roughly with identity, confirms that identifying oneself as straight, bisexual or lesbian is a complex and multifaceted process which does not correlate in a direct or simple manner with sexual practice. These findings mirror those found in an earlier study of homosexually active men not associated with the gay community.¹⁰

One stereotype—that lesbians have fewer partners than gay men—is borne out by the results. Of 273 women (47%) who were in a relationship with another woman, 246 (42% of the total group) described it as monogamous. This percentage is much higher than among the men in the Periodic Survey, among whom only 28% were in a relationship with one regular partner only; 33% of men had one or more regular partners and/or also had sex with casual partners, an arrangement which was rare among the women (4%).

A major concern motivating this research was the possible risk to women whose male sexual partners are also having sex with men. Obviously it is impossible to survey women who are completely unaware that they fall in this category. Apart from the 42 women who had recently had sex with a man they knew to be gay or bisexual, only four women indicated any awareness of the possibility their partner might have sex with men. Although there was no significant difference between the proportions of heterosexual and bisexual women who had had sex with heterosexual men, bisexual women were far more likely than straight women to have had sex with gay or bisexual men. This indicates that bisexual groups may be a useful locus in which to provide safe-sex information and support. However, such a strategy would be insufficient if it were not also complemented by programs targeting the gay and lesbian communities in general.

Twenty women (3%) had had unprotected vaginal or anal intercourse with a gay or bisexual man. This is a reassuringly small proportion of the whole group, but it is still worrying that these women appear to be depending on their male partners' safe practice with other men for their own protection, even though some of the partners were casual.

Injecting drug use in the past six months (12% overall, and 8% among the Fair Day respondents) was several times higher in this group than in the Australian population in general,¹¹ and comparable with the level of 10% found among gay men in the Sydney Men and Sexual Health study.⁵ Women who inject may be at greater risk of HIV infection than men who inject, due to their greater reluctance to use needle exchanges and health services.¹² Women connected with gay and lesbian communities are thus doubly vulnerable, because their injecting buddies may be gay men, who may in turn be more likely than other men to be exposed to the HIV epidemic. These findings indicate that recreational drug use and injecting drug use are issues of concern for the gay and lesbian community. Sterile needles and safe drug-using advice should continue to be made available through gay and lesbian community networks and through mainstream health services.

Conclusion

Results show that sexual identity and behaviour do not always coincide. When women in this social milieu have sex with men, those men are more likely than men Australia-wide to be homosexually active. Policy makers and practitioners need to be aware that neither lesbians

nor women in general are automatically at low HIV risk. A minority of women are at risk of HIV through unsafe sex or injecting drug use or both. Prevention strategies can usefully be directed to gay and lesbian drug user groups, to bisexual groups, and to women who are socially involved with men in the gay community.

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