

# Women in contact with the gay and lesbian community

Sydney Women and Sexual Health survey 1996, 1998 and 2000

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## **GLOSSARY**

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ACON	AIDS Council of New South Wales
AIDS	acquired immune deficiency syndrome
BDSM	mutual consensual activity for the purposes of sexual arousal which involves some sort of pain, physical restraint or domination (from bondage and discipline and sado-masochism)
GLIDUP	Gay and Lesbian Injecting Drug Use Project
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
NSP	needle and syringe program
SMASH	Sydney Men and Sexual Health cohort study
STD	sexually transmissible disease
SWASH	Sydney Women and Sexual Health survey
UVAI	unprotected vaginal or anal intercourse

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# 1 Introduction

At the start of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, considerable attention was paid to the risk of women becoming infected and the spread of HIV from gay men to the 'general community'. Early fears about the infectivity of HIV and spread via bisexual men have now largely been calmed in Australia, as the infection rates among women have remained low compared to those among men. Nonetheless, sex with a man remains the main risk for HIV transmission to women. During 2000, 76 women were newly diagnosed with HIV infection in Australia, 69 of them through heterosexual contact and five through injecting drug use (*Australian HIV Surveillance Report* April 2001).<sup>1</sup> However, it is important to remember that for a case of 'heterosexual' transmission of HIV to occur, neither party need be heterosexual.

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. Further, because of the social circles in which they move, lesbian-identified women and other women associated with gay/lesbian/queer communities who do have sex with men are more likely to have sex with homosexually active men than are women randomly selected from the community at large. If they inject drugs and share injecting equipment with gay or homosexually active male friends, they are more likely to come into contact with HIV.

A number of ACON projects are accessed by women connected to Sydney's gay and lesbian community, including the Women, HIV and Health Promotion project, the Lesbian Health project and the Injecting and Other Drug Use project. In addition, the Women Partners of Bisexual Men Project at Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre (supported by ACON) offers individual support to female partners of bisexual men. Across these groups, some women have reported having sexual contact with and/or injecting drugs with gay or bisexual men. Women also access the Injecting and Other Drug Use Project's needle and syringe services at major gay and lesbian parties. Late in 1995 the Sydney Men and Sexual Health (SMASH) project released a report on men in the gay community and their sex with women (Prestage et al. 1995). This preliminary report raised issues about women in contact with the gay community which needed to be addressed more directly.

These circumstances prompted project officers with GLIDUP (now the Injecting and Other Use Project) and the Women Partners of Gay/Bisexual Men project to initiate research into the

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1. There were also one female child and a further woman for whom exposure category was not available.

contact these women have with community-attached gay and bisexual men. The result was this survey, carried out for the first time in 1996 and again in 1998 and 2000. It is based on convenience sampling and was initiated in order to estimate the HIV-related and associated risks to women in contact with Sydney's gay and lesbian community, with the primary aim of finding whether further work was necessary, either in research or targeted prevention campaigns. The study has been well received by the target population from the first survey in 1996. Its aim has therefore been expanded and questions were added in 1998 on hepatitis C and in 2000 on lesbian safe sex practice and also hepatitis A and B. Questions on specific lesbian sex practices were added in 2000 to address the lack of information available on sex practices between women that have a higher theoretical risk of HIV transmission. A question on the use of dental dams was also included, as an indicator of how often dams are incorporated in sexual practice between women, both generally and when blood is involved.

This monograph reports primarily on the 2000 survey, but 1996 and 1998 figures are given in the tables for comparison.<sup>2</sup> Because of slight differences in the sampling and the questionnaire, the differences between the years cannot be attributed solely to change over time. Rather the figures from the three surveys should be read together to give an approximate indication of HIV-related behaviour and risk factors among women in this milieu.

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2. The 1996 survey was reported on in Richters et al. 1997 and the 1998 survey in Richters et al. 2002.



## 2 Methods and sample

For the 1996 survey, 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 sexual and/or social contact with Sydney's gay community (Prestage et al. 1996). The questionnaire asked women about HIV-related risk behaviours including drug use and sex with gay or bisexual men. In 2000, because of our experience in 1996 and 1998, we altered some questions slightly to improve comprehension and to provide check data on important points. We also added some new questions related to sex between women. Where the 1996 and 1998 questionnaires differed materially, only the 1998 and 2000 results are given here. (See Appendix for a copy of the 2000 questionnaire.)

In February–May 2000 the questionnaire was distributed to women attending the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Fair Day at Victoria Park in inner western Sydney and at several other gay/lesbian community venues and health services. Some venues used for distribution in 1998 were not used in 2000, so the sample was not exactly the same. Volunteer respondents were offered raffle tickets with prizes of Sydney Harbour Bridge climb tickets, books and CDs in return for the completed questionnaires.

Results were entered from the coded questionnaires into an ASCII file which was then loaded into SPSS for analysis. The data were cleaned and checked for internal consistency and checked against the questionnaires where inconsistencies were found. All additional comments and answers to open-ended questions were transferred from the questionnaires. The analysis presented here is primarily descriptive, with cross-tabs and *t*-tests to confirm significant differences between subgroups. *P* values were calculated using Pearson's chi-square statistic or Fisher's exact test where appropriate (i.e. where the 'expected' number was very small).

In 2000, as in previous years, the majority of respondents took part in the survey at Fair Day. They were completing the questionnaires under less than ideal conditions: usually standing at a booth, on a muggy day. It is not surprising therefore that the non-answer rate for some questions was high, especially those requiring writing a word or phrase rather than simply ticking a box. It was also clear that many respondents simply left a question blank when it did not apply to them, rather than ticking the 'no' response. For this reason, percentages have generally been calculated in this report on the total sample, not on the question-specific response rate, which would have inflated the 'yes' percentages. Readers can take the 'yes' percentages given as lower-bound estimates and judge for themselves whether to interpret the missing people as likely to be similar to the respondents or likely to mean 'no' or 'not applicable'. Where the non-answer rate was low and the difference between the valid and total percentages was less than 1%, results are generally given without comment on missing responses.

### 3 Results: recruitment and sample characteristics

#### Recruitment

In 2000, at the Mardi Gras Fair Day, 883 women completed the survey; a further 242 were recruited at the other venues and clinics over the following weeks, giving a total of 1125 responses. Social events/venues included a women's sauna party, pubs and clubs and a social-cum-sporting venue. Community groups included a stall run by the AIDS Council of New South Wales, and clinics included a private primary care and STD/HIV practice (Table 1). Questionnaires were offered to everyone identifying as a woman who was willing to respond. Because of practical difficulties, refusal rates were not calculated. Fair Day is an open-air function, so people who wish to avoid researchers handing out questionnaires can take a route to avoid people carrying clipboards or directing respondents to the booths; they can also easily accept a survey form and disappear with it. Few women explicitly refused a verbal offer to contribute (less than 5%); they appeared mostly to do so because they felt they had nothing to contribute because they were not sexually active or did not perceive HIV/AIDS risks as relevant to them.

**Table 1 : Recruitment venue category**

	1996		1998		2000	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Mardi Gras Fair Day	496	84.8	554	71.6	883	78.5
Community social event/venue	5	0.9	136	17.6	73	6.5
Community group/meeting	42	7.2	37	4.8	113	10.0
Clinic/NSP	42	7.2	47	6.1	56	5.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>585</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>774</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1125</b>	<b>100.0</b>

#### Social attachment to the gay community

Of the total 1125 respondents, 95 per cent said that at least a few of their friends were gay men (Table 2). In the past six months, 75 per cent had attended a gay or lesbian bar or dance party (Table 3). The great majority had at least some social contact with gay men: 85 per cent had more than a few gay male friends or had attended a gay or lesbian social venue.

**Table 2 : Number of friends who are gay or homosexual men**

	1996		1998		2000	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
None	28	4.8	24	3.1	53	4.7
A few	169	28.9	212	27.4	379	33.7
Some	214	36.6	260	33.6	419	37.2
Most	162	27.7	260	33.6	251	22.3
All	8	1.4	13	1.7	16	1.4
Not answered	4	0.7	5	0.6	7	0.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>585</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>774</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1125</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 3 : Attendance at gay/lesbian social venues in the past six months**

Venue	1996 %	1998 %	2000 %
Gay bar	62	68	61
Lesbian bar	64	65	51
Gay/lesbian dance party	44	49	35
Any one of the above	79	85	75

Fifty-five per cent of the women (623/1125; 73 did not answer the question) lived in inner or eastern Sydney, around the areas generally associated with 'gay Sydney' (Table 4). This area includes only 18.7 per cent of Sydney's total population of women aged 15 or over (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996 Census).

**Table 4 : Where respondents lived**

Location	1996		1998		2000	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Gay Sydney <sup>a</sup>	58	9.9	72	9.3	83	7.4
Eastern suburbs	73	12.5	105	13.6	125	11.1
Inner Sydney	243	41.5	278	35.9	415	36.9
Southern suburbs	25	4.3	42	5.4	64	5.7
Northern suburbs	50	8.5	70	9.0	107	9.5
Western suburbs	45	7.7	63	8.1	96	8.5
Outside Sydney	69	11.8	103	13.3	162	14.4
Not answered	22	3.8	41	5.3	73	6.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>585</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>774</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1125</b>	<b>100.0</b>

(a) Darlinghurst and Surry Hills, eastern inner city districts around Oxford Street.

## Transgender respondents

Sixteen of the 1125 respondents in 2000 indicated that they were transgender. This is fewer than in previous years and is only 1.4 per cent of the group as a whole. Ten of them were recruited from groups or clinics. In 1996 there were 27 trans respondents (4.6%) and in 1998, 20 (2.6%). The trans respondents<sup>3</sup> differed significantly from the other women on only a few variables, which are noted below where appropriate.

3. This term is often used by Sydney transgender people of themselves, sometimes spelt 'trans'. It has the advantage of avoiding any political difficulties with the distinction between transsexual and transgender.

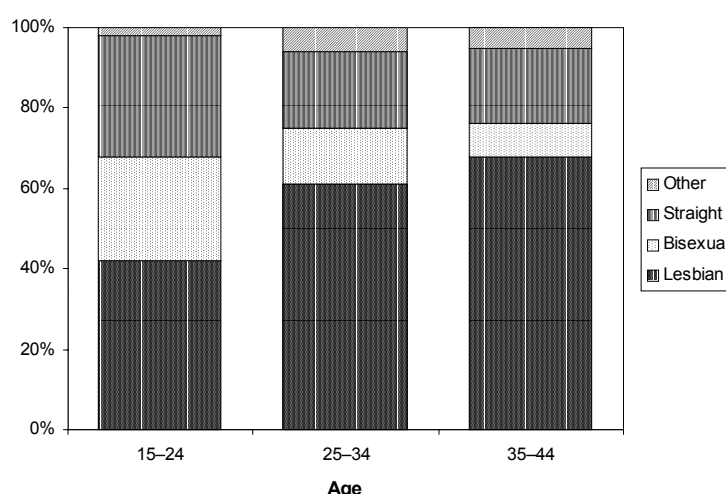
## Sexual identity

The questionnaire asked, 'Do you think of yourself as: Lesbian/dyke/homosexual/gay, Bisexual, Heterosexual/straight, Other (please specify)'. This response is termed 'sexual identity' here. Throughout this report, when women are referred to as lesbian, bisexual etc., it is this self-description that is being used. Three-fifths of the women described themselves as lesbian/dyke/etc. (Table 9). About one in four identified as heterosexual or straight and one in 10 as bisexual. Six women used some other term to describe themselves, most of them resisting sexual categorisation; one wrote 'no labels'. Six of those who ticked either lesbian, bisexual or straight also added a comment, such as 'queer' (3). Twenty-two women did not answer the question.

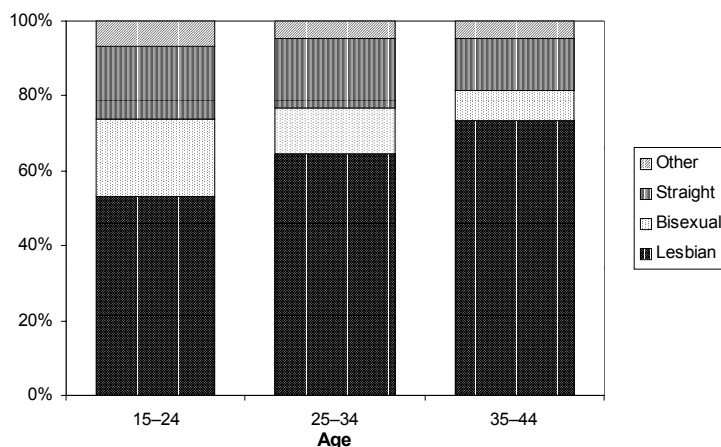
**Table 5 : Stated sexual identity**

	1996		1998		2000	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Lesbian/homosexual	340	58.1	503	65.0	682	60.6
Bisexual	86	14.7	100	12.9	118	10.5
Heterosexual/straight	124	21.2	133	17.2	295	26.2
Other	20	3.4	27	3.5	8	0.7
Not answered	15	2.6	11	1.4	22	2.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>585</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>774</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1125</b>	<b>100.0</b>

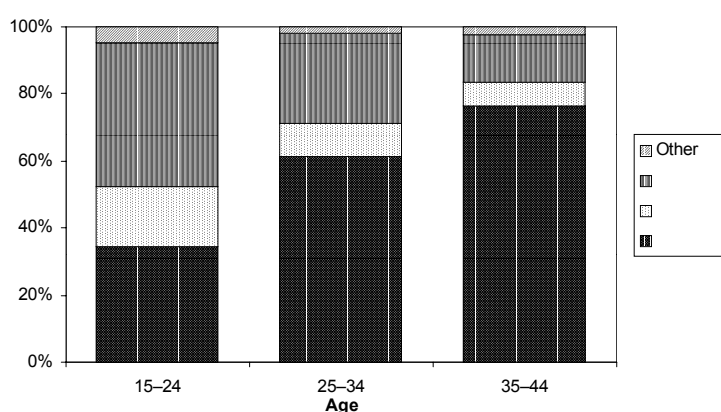
Age (see p. 7) and sexual identity have been correlated in each survey since 1996. Younger women were more likely than older women to identify as bisexual and less likely to identify as lesbian. In 2000 there were more heterosexual respondents, mostly in the youngest age group. This may reflect the widening social appeal of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Fair Day, which has been held since 1999 near the University of Sydney.



**Figure 1 : Sexual identity by age group, 1996**



**Figure 2 : Sexual identity by age group, 1998**

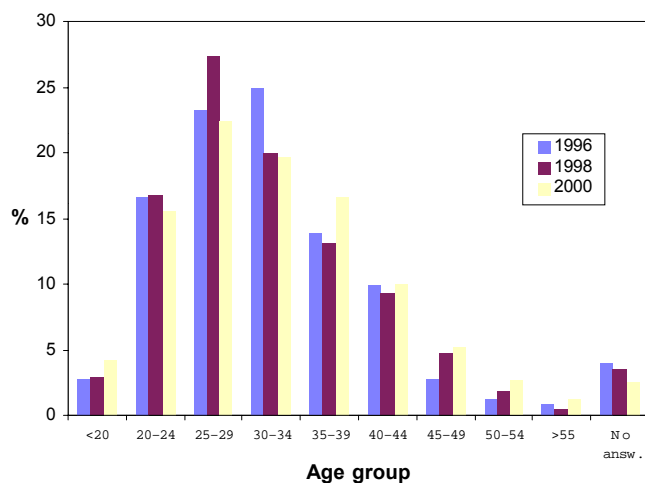


**Figure 3 : Sexual identity by age group, 2000**

## Social and demographic characteristics

### Age

The age range was 16 to 68 years and the median age 31 (28 women did not answer the question). The age distribution in 2000 was very similar to that in previous surveys. See Figure 4.



**Figure 4 : Age distribution of sample, 1996 ( $n = 585$ ), 1998 ( $n = 774$ ) and 2000 ( $n = 1125$ )**

## Education and employment

This was a well-educated sample: 72 per cent had post-school qualifications (1996, 72%; 1998, 64%; see Table 6). For comparison, only 40 per cent of Australian women aged 15 to 64 had qualifications in 2000 (ABS 2000). Of those who answered the question on employment ( $n = 1093$ ), 65 per cent were employed full-time and 16 per cent were students (some of whom were also employed) (Table 7). The question on employment asked in 1996 was not comparable and results are not shown.

**Table 6 : Education**

	1996		1998		2000	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Primary school only	4	0.7	2	0.3	6	0.5
Up to 3 years of high school	26	4.4	40	5.2	28	2.5
Year 10/School Certificate	50	8.5	117	15.1	97	8.6
Year 12/Higher School Certificate	79	13.5	108	14.0	175	15.6
Tertiary diploma or trade certificate	108	18.5	144	18.6	216	19.2
University or college degree	292	49.9	330	42.6	575	51.1
Not answered	26	4.4	33	4.3	28	2.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>585</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>774</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1125</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 7 : Employment status**

Employment status	1998		2000	
	Number	%	Number	%
Employed full-time	485	62.6	726	64.5
Employed part-time	144	18.6	170	15.1
Unemployed	39	5.0	63	5.6
A student	103	13.3	180	16.0
A pensioner or on social security benefits	44	5.7	41	3.6
Doing domestic duties	17	2.2	21	1.9
A voluntary worker	27	3.5	—	—
Not in the work force	9	1.1	14	1.2
Not answered	28	3.6	32	2.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>774</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1125</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Note: These categories are not mutually exclusive.

## Children

Ten per cent of respondents had dependent children, and there was no difference between lesbians and heterosexual women in the proportion who had children. This is a change since 1998, when 15 per cent of the straight women but only 7 per cent of the lesbians had children.

**Table 8 : Percentage of respondents who had dependent children, by sexual identity**

	1998		2000	
	Number	% of category	Number	% of category
Lesbian	35	7.0	69	10.3
Bisexual	8	8.0	11	9.5
Heterosexual	20	15.0	31	10.9
Other / n.a.	5	13.2	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>8.8</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>9.9</b>

## Ethnicity

The 2000 data on ethnicity differed from previous surveys in a number of ways. More women answered the question on ethnicity, with only 3 per cent of respondents refusing to answer as compared to 20 per cent in 1996 and 13 per cent in 1998. Also, there was a slight increase in the proportion of respondents who identified as Anglo-Australian, European and Asian, and, conversely, a decrease in the proportion of women who identified as Aboriginal. Table 9 shows the responses grouped into broad categories. This cannot be compared directly with the Census data, which report place of birth and language spoken rather than ethnic affiliation. However, 5.5 per cent of Sydney's population was born in southern Europe and 9.5 per cent in eastern Asia (ABS, 1996 Census). This suggests that the SWASH sample contains more Europeans and fewer Asians than would be expected if it were similar to the total Sydney population.

**Table 9 : Ethnic group categories**

Ethnic group	1996		1998		2000	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Anglo-Australian <sup>a</sup>	373	63.8	557	72.0	871	77.4
Aboriginal	15	2.6	8	1.0	8	0.7
European <sup>b</sup>	36	6.2	60	7.8	114	10.1
Asian	10	1.7	11	1.4	28	2.5
Other	29	5.0	36	4.7	66	5.9
Not answered	122	20.9	102	13.2	38	3.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>585</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>774</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1125</b>	<b>100.0</b>

(a) Including UK and Irish/Scottish/Celtic.

(b) Including Middle Eastern.

## 4 Results: sexual partners

Respondents were asked whether they had had sex with women, with gay or bisexual men, and with heterosexual men. Results are shown in Tables 10 to 23.

### Sex with women

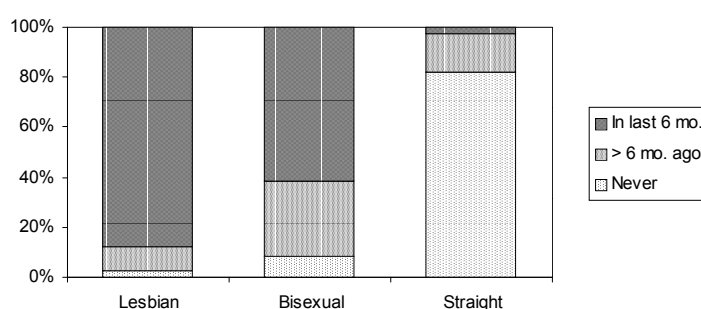
In 2000, 812 women (72%) reported that they had ever had sex with a woman, and 642 (57%) had done so in the past six months. (Twenty-one women did not answer the question.)<sup>4</sup>

**Table 10 : When respondents last had sex with a woman**

	1998		2000	
	Number	%	Number	%
Never	136	17.6	292	26.0
Over 6 months ago	102	13.2	170	15.0
In the past 6 months	519	67.1	642	57.2
Not answered	17	.2	21	1.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>774</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1125</b>	<b>100.0</b>

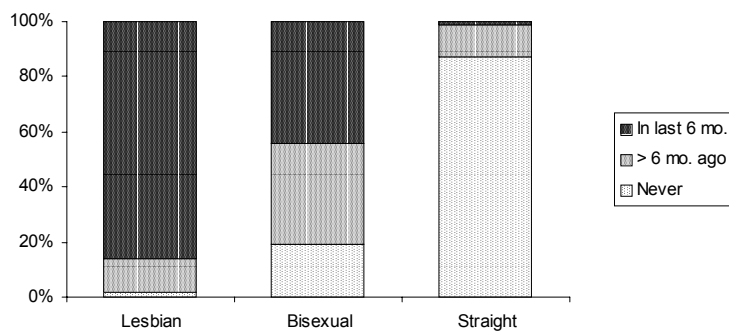
**Table 11 : When respondents last had sex with a woman, by sexual identity**

	1998				2000			
	Lesbian	Bisexual	Straight	Other/ n.a.	Lesbian	Bisexual	Straight	Other/ n.a.
Never	12	8	108	8	10	22	254	6
Over 6 months ago	49	29	21	3	86	41	35	8
In the past 6 months	434	59	3	23	579	50	3	10
Not answered	8	4	1	4	7	5	3	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>503</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>682</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>295</b>	<b>30</b>



**Figure 5 : When respondents last had sex with a woman, by sexual identity, 1998**





**Figure 6 : When respondents last had sex with a woman, by sexual identity, 2000**

**Table 12 : Number of female sexual partners in the past six months**

Number of partners	1998		2000	
	Number	%	Number	%
One	388	74.8	548	85.4
2–5	114	22.0	87	13.6
6–10	7	1.3	3	0.5
>10	3	0.6	0	0.0
Not answered	12	2.3	4	0.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>519</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>642</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 13 : Number of female sexual partners in the past six months, by sexual identity of respondents**

Number of partners	Lesbian	Bisexual	Straight	Other/n.a.
<b>1998 (n = 514)</b>				
One	332	35	3	13
2–5	89	20	0	5
6–10	4	3	0	0
>10	3	0	0	0
Not answered	6	1	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>434</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>2000 (n = 641)</b>				
One	507	31	3	7
2–5	68	16	0	3
6–10	1	2	0	0
>10	0	0	0	0
Not answered	3	1	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>579</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>

The great majority of the lesbians (90%) reported having recently had sex with at least one woman, as did 42 per cent of the bisexual women, 33 per cent of the 'other' women and 1 per cent of the straight women.

## Safe sex practices with women

Although there are no recorded cases in Australia of a woman contracting HIV through sexual contact with another woman, it is theoretically possible. HIV prevention information is offered at lesbian social functions, and safe sex kits and supplies including dental dams, gloves, lubricant and condoms are distributed. In 2000 for the first time we asked women about their use of dental dams for sex with women in the past six months. Of the 642 women who had had sex with a woman in the past six months, the huge majority (599) said they had never used a dam. Only 40 women had used a dental dam: 30 reported doing so once, nine several times and one 'every time'. Three did not answer. (Some of the 642 women may only have had sexual encounters that did not include oral sex.) We also asked about oral sex during menstruation. The majority of women (409/635; 64.4 per cent) reported no oral sex (given or received) during menstruation. Among those who had oral sex during menstruation, it was much more common to do so with a tampon in place than to use a dental dam (see Table 14). Thirty-six women reported having some other form of lesbian sex (such as BDSM) in which blood was involved. A further 14 women, not shown in the table, also replied 'yes' to this question, although they had indicated earlier in the questionnaire that they had had no sex with women in the past six months. Perhaps they did not notice the qualification about the past six months, or did not count some encounters (such as BDSM) as sex.

Given that three quarters of the women who had used a dental dam had done so only once, it is possible that this use was experimental rather than driven by safe sex considerations. None of the three women who were HIV-positive had used a dental dam in the last six months. (HIV status of women partners was not asked.) There was no correlation between experience of herpes and dam use; however, the questionnaire did not ask about oral herpes (cold sores).

**Table 14 : Exposure to blood during lesbian sex: practice of oral sex during menstruation and other sex involving blood, among women who had had sex with a woman in the past six months**

	Given oral sex to woman who was menstruating		Received oral sex while menstruating		Any other form of lesbian sex involving blood	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Yes	110	17.1	127	19.8	36	5.6
Yes, but always with a dam	3	0.5	4	0.6	–	–
Yes, but always with a tampon	60	9.3	61	9.5	–	–
No	467	72.7	443	69.0	600	93.5
Not answered	2	0.3	7	1.1	6	0.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>642</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>642</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>642</b>	<b>100.0</b>

## Sex with gay or bisexual men

Two hundred and thirty-one women (21 per cent) had had sex with a gay or bisexual man, and 43 (4 per cent of the total group) had done so in the past six months (Table 15); three of the 43 were trannies. Twenty of these women had had sex with more than one gay or bisexual man (Table 17). Only one of the three respondents who had had six or more gay/bi male partners in the past six months was a transnie.

**Table 15 : When respondents last had sex with a gay or bisexual man**

	1996		1998		2000	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Never	430	73.5	540	69.8	877	78.0
Over 6 months ago	109	18.6	161	20.8	188	16.7
In the past 6 months	42	7.2	51	6.6	43	3.8
Not answered	4	0.7	22	2.8	17	1.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>585</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>774</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1125</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 16 : When respondents last had sex with a gay or bisexual man, by sexual identity**

	Lesbian	Bisexual	Straight	Other
<b>1996 (n = 585)</b>				
Never	285	38	82	25
Over 6 months ago	50	20	34	5
In the past 6 months	5	25	7	5
Not answered	0	3	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>340</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>1998 (n = 774)</b>				
Never	388	44	89	19
Over 6 months ago	92	30	31	8
In the past 6 months	9	25	10	7
Not answered	14	1	3	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>503</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>2000 (n = 1125)</b>				
Never	577	55	231	14
Over 6 months ago	97	37	47	7
In the past 6 months	4	23	12	4
Not answered	4	3	5	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>682</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>295</b>	<b>30</b>

**Table 17 : Number of gay or bisexual male sexual partners in the past six months**

Number of partners	1996		1998		2000	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
One	17	40.5	31	60.8	23	53.5
2–5	19	45.2	16	31.4	12	27.9
6–10	3	7.1	2	3.9	3	7.0
>10	3	7.1	2	3.9	5	11.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 18 : Number of gay or bisexual male sexual partners in the past six months, by sexual identity of respondents**

Number of partners	Lesbian	Bisexual	Straight	Other
<b>1996 (n = 42)</b>				
One	1	8	5	3
2–5	3	13	2	1
6–10	0	3	0	0
> 10	1	1	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1998 (n = 51)</b>				
One	6	15	7	3
2–5	2	9	3	2
6–10	0	1	0	1
> 10	1	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2000 (n = 43)</b>				
One	1	13	7	2
2–5	0	7	4	1
6–10	0	2	0	1
> 10	3	1	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>4</b>

Four lesbians (less than 1 per cent) reported that they had recently had sex with a gay or bisexual man, as did 4 per cent of the heterosexual women. Sex with gay men was much more common among the bisexual women, of whom 19 per cent had had sex with one or more gay or bisexual men in the past six months ( $P < 0.001$ ).

## Sex with heterosexual men

Seven hundred and eighty-seven women (70 per cent) had had sex with one or more heterosexual men, of whom 314 (28 per cent of the total) had done so in the past six months (Table 19). Five of the women who had had sex with a straight male partner in the past six months were trannies. Seven women (of whom none were trannies) had had more than 10 such partners (Table 21);<sup>4</sup> five of these women had done sex work in the past six months.

**Table 19 : When respondents last had sex with a heterosexual man**

	1998		2000	
	Number	%	Number	%
Never	191	24.7	314	27.9
Over 6 months ago	377	48.7	473	42.0
In the past 6 months	181	23.4	314	27.9
Not answered	25	3.2	24	2.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>774</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1125</b>	<b>100.0</b>

4. Because of a fault in the layout of the 1996 questionnaire, the responses to this question were inconsistent, so no 1996 figures are given here.

**Table 20 : When respondents last had sex with a heterosexual man, by sexual identity**

	Lesbian	Bisexual	Straight	Other/n.a.
<b>1998 (n = 774)</b>				
Never	163	8	10	10
Over 6 months ago	304	37	22	14
In the past 6 months	18	54	99	10
Not answered	18	1	2	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>503</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>2000 (n = 1125)</b>				
Never	268	12	26	8
Over 6 months ago	386	38	42	7
In the past 6 months	16	66	224	8
Not answered	12	2	3	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>682</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>295</b>	<b>30</b>

Of the lesbian women, 2 per cent had had sex with at least one straight man in the past six months, as had 56 per cent of the bisexual women and 76 per cent of the straight women. Among women who had had sex with a straight man, bisexual women appeared somewhat more likely than heterosexual women to have had more than one such partner: 47 per cent of the bisexual women and 36 per cent of the straight women had done so (Table 22).

**Table 21 : Number of heterosexual male sexual partners in the past six months**

Number of partners	1998		2000	
	Number	%	Number	%
One	104	57.5	180	57.3
2–5	53	29.3	104	33.1
6–10	7	3.9	11	3.5
> 10	15	8.3	7	2.2
Not answered	2	1.1	12	3.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>181</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>314</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 22 : Number of heterosexual male partners in the past six months, by sexual identity of respondents**

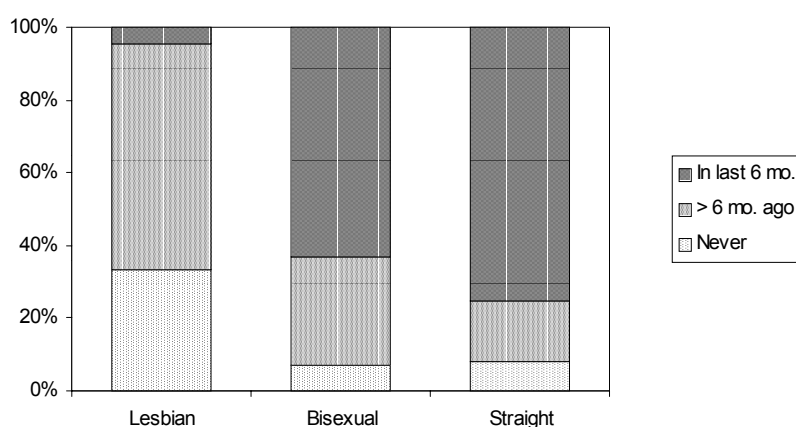
	Lesbian	Bisexual	Straight	Other/n.a.
<b>1998 (n = 181)</b>				
One	9	21	71	3
2–5	3	23	23	4
6–10	0	4	2	1
> 10	5	6	2	2
Not answered	1	0	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2000 (n = 314)</b>				
One	9	35	135	1
2–5	2	25	71	6
6–10	0	2	8	1
> 10	1	4	2	0
Not answered	4	0	8	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>8</b>

## Sex with men in general

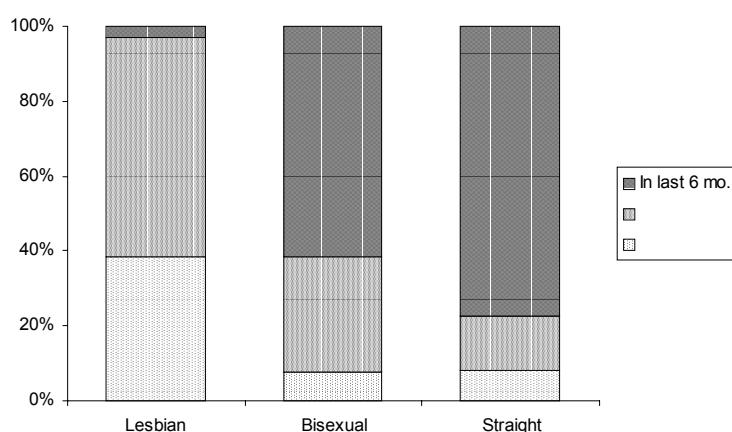
Women's experience of sex with men in general, whatever the men's apparent sexual identity/orientation, is shown in Table 23. It is notable that 412 of the 682 lesbians (60 per cent) have ever had sex with a man.

**Table 23 : When respondents last had sex with a man, by sexual identity**

	Lesbian	Bisexual	Straight	Other/n.a.
<b>1998 (n = 774)</b>				
Never	167	7	11	8
Over 6 months ago	308	30	22	13
In the past 6 months	23	63	100	12
No answer	5	0	0	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>503</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>2000 (n = 1125)</b>				
Never	258	9	24	6
Over 6 months ago	393	36	42	6
In the past 6 months	19	72	226	11
No answer	12	1	3	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>682</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>295</b>	<b>30</b>



**Figure 7 : When respondents last had sex with a man, by sexual identity, 1998**



**Figure 8 : When respondents last had sex with a man, by sexual identity, 2000**

## Sexual preference

The questionnaire asked 'Do you enjoy having sex with men, women or both?'; the responses are shown in Table 24. There was considerable but not complete correspondence between sexual identity and enjoyment of sex with men or women. Almost all lesbians said they enjoyed sex with women, 85 per cent only with women, and 13 per cent mostly with women. However, a few lesbians said they liked men only (two women, not trannies) or men and women equally (one woman). Bisexual women enjoyed sex with men and women equally (27 per cent), or had a preference for mostly women (27 per cent) or mostly men (16 per cent). They were more likely than the women in the other groups to say 'can't compare' (15 per cent). Of straight women, 75 per cent said they enjoyed sex only with men, but 16 per cent had a non-exclusive preference, and three women (not trannies) said they enjoyed sex only with women. Note that this question does not ask whether the women found men, women or both sexually attractive, or would like to have sex with them if they have not done so.

**Table 24 : Enjoyment of sex with men or women, by sexual identity**

	Lesbian %	Bisexual %	Straight %	Other <sup>a</sup> %
<b>1996 (n = 585)</b>	<b>n = 340</b>	<b>n = 86</b>	<b>n = 124</b>	<b>n = 35</b>
Men only	0.9	0.0	70.2	25.7
Mostly men	0.3	27.9	22.6	17.1
Men and women equally	0.3	44.2	1.6	14.3
Mostly women	20.3	19.8	0.0	25.7
Women only	77.1	3.5	0.8	5.7
No one	0.9	1.2	3.2	5.7
No answer <sup>b</sup>	0.3	3.5	1.6	5.7
<b>1998 (n = 774)</b>	<b>n = 503</b>	<b>n = 100</b>	<b>n = 133</b>	<b>n = 38</b>
Men only	0.4	2.0	62.4	10.5
Mostly men	0.0	13.0	21.1	10.5
Men and women equally	0.8	27.0	0.8	5.3
Mostly women	16.9	21.0	0.8	23.7
Women only	79.1	3.0	0.8	23.7
No one	0.4	0.0	2.3	2.6
No answer <sup>b</sup>	2.4	34.0	12.0	23.7
<b>2000 (n = 1125)</b>	<b>n = 682</b>	<b>n = 118</b>	<b>n = 295</b>	<b>n = 30</b>
Men only	0.3	4.2	74.2	16.7
Mostly men	0.0	16.1	14.6	20.0
Men and women equally	0.1	27.1	0.7	6.7
Mostly women	12.9	27.1	0.3	3.3
Women only	84.9	1.7	1.0	10.0
No one	0.1	0.8	1.4	0.0
No answer <sup>b</sup>	1.6	22.9	7.8	43.3

(a) Including women who did not answer the question on sexual identity.

(b) Including women who answered 'It depends' or 'Can't compare'. This was not offered as a response on the 1996 questionnaire, although a few women wrote it

## Regular relationships

Respondents were asked whether they were currently in a sexual relationship with a regular partner (Table 25); 49 per cent were in a relationship with a woman.

**Table 25 : Regular relationships**

	1998		2000	
	Number	%	Number	%
Yes—with a woman	410	53.0	550	48.9
Yes—with a man	114	14.7	203	18.0
Yes—with both	8	1.0	6	0.5
No regular relationship	233	30.1	354	31.5
Not answered	9	1.2	12	1.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>774</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1125</b>	<b>100.0</b>

## Casual sex

Respondents were asked whether they had had casual sex in the last six months (Table 26). Of those not in a regular relationship, 43 per cent had had casual sex. Only 13 per cent of those currently in regular relationships (100 out of 749) said they had had casual sex in the past six months (Table 27). This is in contrast to the men responding to the Sydney Gay Community Periodic Survey at the same time, among whom having a regular relationship where one partner or both may have sex with other men (37 per cent of respondents; 42 per cent of those in a regular relationship) is more common than exclusive monogamy (29 per cent of respondents; 40 per cent of those in a relationship).

**Table 26 : Casual sex**

	1998		2000	
	Number	%	Number	%
Yes—with women	104	13.4	97	8.6
Yes—with men	44	5.7	129	11.5
Yes—with both	32	4.1	25	2.2
No casual partners	581	75.1	849	75.5
No answer	13	1.7	25	2.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>774</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1125</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 27 : Casual sex among respondents in regular relationships**

	In a regular relationship		
	With a woman	With a man	With both
<b>1998 (n = 527)<sup>a</sup></b>			
Casual sex with women	43	4	2
Casual sex with men	0	18	0
Casual sex with both	3	8	4
No casual sex	359	84	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>405</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2000 (n = 749)<sup>b</sup></b>			
Casual sex with women	38	6	0
Casual sex with men	0	44	2
Casual sex with both	4	3	3
No casual sex	502	146	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>544</b>	<b>199</b>	<b>6</b>

(a) Excluding 15 women who did not answer about either casual sex or relationships.

(b) Excluding 28 women who did not answer about either casual sex or relationships.



## Sex work

Thirty-four respondents said they had done sex work in the past six months. Although only 10 per cent of the total respondent group identified as bisexual, 35 per cent of the women who had done sex work were bisexual. Identifying as lesbian was less common among those who had done sex work (26 per cent) than in the group as a whole (61 per cent). Three of the 34 women who had done sex work had recently injected drugs. Not surprisingly, women who had done sex work were more likely to have had more than 10 recent heterosexual male sexual partners than other women.

## Women in a regular relationship with a gay or bisexual man

In the 2000 survey, 24 women gave an answer other than 'heterosexual' for their regular male partner's identity/behaviour: two said he was gay, 15 bisexual, two 'other' and five said they did not know whether he had sex with men. Fifteen of these women answered the question about the HIV status of their male partner. One said he was HIV-positive, eight that he was negative and six that they did not know or he had not been tested. (The woman whose gay partner was HIV-positive reported no oral, vaginal or anal sex with him in the past six months.)

Thirteen of the 24 women indicated that they had a clear agreement with their non-heterosexual regular partner about him having sex with men (Table 28). Four stipulated that he must have no anal sex with men, and nine that he must always use condoms for anal sex with men, which has been the most common explicit agreement in each survey since 1996. Of the 11 women who did not have a clear agreement, six did not answer the question about agreements; they had partners described as 'other' or 'don't know if he has sex with men'. Of the other five, who had partners they described as gay or bisexual, four had had unprotected vaginal or anal intercourse with him and the fifth did not answer the question. These four (or five) women are relying on their partners' safe practice with other men for their own protection, without explicit negotiation.

**Table 28 : Agreement about partner's sex with other men**

Type of agreement	1996 Number	1998 Number	2000 Number
He must have no sex with men	1	2	4 <sup>b</sup>
He must have no anal sex with men	1 <sup>a</sup>	1	0
He must always use condoms for anal sex with men	7	8	9
He can have anal sex with men without a condom	1	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>13</b>

(a) 'He is not into anal sex with men.'

(b) One said 'He only has sex with me.'

**Table 29 : Sexual acts practised occasionally or often with a gay or bisexual regular partner**

Sexual practice	1996 Number	1998 Number	2000 Number
Oral sex with ejaculation	18	12	10
Vaginal sex with condom	19	10	7
Vaginal without condom, no ejaculation	10	10	8
Vaginal without condom, with ejaculation	15	12	11
Anal sex with condom	11	4	2
Anal without condom, no ejaculation	3	5	6
Anal without condom, with ejaculation	4	4	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>

## Sexual practices with casual gay or bisexual male partners

**Table 30 : Women who had had sex with a gay/bi man: sexual acts practised occasionally or often with casual partner(s)**

Sexual practice	1996 Number	1998 Number	2000 Number
Oral sex with ejaculation	8	13	11
Vaginal sex with condom	18	19	20
Vaginal without a condom, no ejaculation	2	10	12
Vaginal without a condom with ejaculation	4	6	12
Anal sex with condom	10	12	8
Anal without condom, no ejaculation	2	7	3
Anal without condom with ejaculation	1	4	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>25</b>

There were two trannies in this group; one reported vaginal intercourse and one reported anal sex.

**Table 31 : Women having unprotected<sup>a</sup> vaginal or anal intercourse in the past six months with a gay or bisexual male partner**

Unprotected intercourse	1996 Number	1998 Number	2000 Number
Regular partners			
Vaginal	16	14	18
Anal	4	6	9
Any intercourse	17	14	19
Casual partners			
Vaginal	5	13	15
Anal	2	8	4
Any intercourse	6	13	17
Regular or casual			
Any intercourse	20 <sup>b</sup>	25 <sup>c</sup>	34 <sup>b</sup>

(a) Without condoms, with or without ejaculation.

(b) Two women had vaginal withdrawal<sup>5</sup> as their only unprotected intercourse.

(c) Three women had vaginal withdrawal as their only unprotected intercourse.

5. Evidence to define vaginal intercourse without ejaculation as more risky for HIV transmission than oral sex with ejaculation is lacking (Vincenzi et al. 1994).

Are these practices potentially placing women at risk? To summarise, 34 women had unprotected vaginal or anal sex with a regular or casual gay/bi partner (Table 31). Of these 34 respondents, 17 had unprotected vaginal or anal intercourse (UVAI) with a casual partner. There were 17 who had UVAI only with a regular partner. Some of these women may be at risk of STDs from their partners' other activities.

Fourteen women (1 per cent of the whole sample) said that they had had group sex involving a gay/bi man in the past six months. Six of these women were among the 43 who reported having had sex with a gay/bi man in the past six months (the other eight may have incorrectly reported group sex occurring more than six months ago, or they may not have regarded it as sex *with* a gay man). Those who had had group sex were more likely than other women to identify as bisexual ( $P = 0.001$ ), to have done sex work ( $P < 0.001$ ) and to have injected drugs ( $P = 0.001$ ), indicating the possible presence of a subcultural pattern of behaviour. (Note, however, that this analysis is based on very small numbers.) A similar subcultural pattern in gay men is related to higher risks of HIV seroconversion. It is hard to tell to what degree group sex itself exposes women to risk, as group sex is often part of a scene such as BDSM where body fluids are unlikely to be exchanged.

## Sex and drug use

Women were also asked whether they had had sex with a gay/bi man while under the influence of drugs other than alcohol; 13 (30 per cent of the 43) indicated that they had done so (see Table 32). The drugs most commonly mentioned were ecstasy and speed.

**Table 32 : Drug use while having sex with gay or bisexual men**

Drug	1996 Number	1998 Number	2000 Number
Amyl	1	3	0
Marijuana	9	10	0
Speed	7	7	6
Cocaine	8	6	2
Ecstasy	4	4	7
MDA	0	0	1
Heroin	4	4	0
Methadone	1	1	0
LSD	1	3	0
Tranquillisers	3	1	0
Drug(s) not stated	2	2	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>13</b>

## 5 Results: injecting drug use

Asked whether they had injected drugs in the past six months, 35 (3 per cent) said yes (Table 33). Of the 242 respondents from the clinics and community venues, 16 (6.6 per cent) had injected (six women did not answer the question). Of the 883 Mardi Gras Fair Day respondents, 19 (2.2 per cent) had injected (21 women did not answer). The data appear to show a decline in the proportion of women reporting recent injecting drug use. The drop in the 'Clinic/NSP' category is probably due largely to a change in recruitment venues in 2000, when no needle and syringe points were surveyed. However, the drop in the number of injectors in the Fair Day sample is harder to explain and may represent a genuine decrease in prevalence of recent injecting.

**Table 33 : Injecting drug use in past six months by recruitment venue category**

	1996		1998		2000	
	Number of injectors	% of category	Number of injectors	% of category	Number of injectors	% of category
Mardi Gras Fair Day	40	8.1	29	5.2	19	2.2
Community social event/venue	2	40.0	7	5.1	3	4.1
Community group/meeting	9	21.4	6	16.2	6	5.3
Clinic/NSP <sup>a</sup>	20	47.6	19	40.4	7	12.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>12.1</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>3.1</b>

(a) NSP = needle and syringe supply point .

In the past, injectors have been largely confined to the under-35 age groups (92 per cent in 1996 and 80 per cent in 1998). In 2000, 22 (63 per cent) were under 35, and the age distribution of injectors was much the same as for the group as a whole.

**Table 34 : Drug injectors by sexual identity, compared with total group**

	1996			1998			2000		
	Injectors		Total	Injectors		Total	Injectors		Total
	<i>n</i>	%	%	<i>n</i>	%	%	<i>n</i>	%	%
Lesbian	34	48	58	35	57	65	18	51	61
Bisexual	19	27	15	10	16	13	7	20	11
Straight	14	20	21	11	18	17	8	23	26
Other/n.a.	4	6	6	5	8	5	2	6	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 34 shows recent drug injectors by sexual identity. The 'Total %' column is included to show the proportion of the total sample represented by the identity category in question, for comparison with the proportion of the same category in the injector subgroup. Thus for example in 1996, 48 per cent of the injectors were lesbians, but 58 per cent of the survey group as a whole were lesbians. There is a tendency for bisexuals to be over-represented, and lesbians somewhat under-represented, among those who had recently injected drugs. To put it the other way round, a higher percentage of bisexuals than of lesbians had injected drugs. In 1996 there seemed to be a correlation between bisexual identity, sex work and injecting drug use and in 1998 between sex work and injecting; numbers are too small in the 2000 data to make reliable inferences. In 2000, three of the 35 injectors (9 per cent) had done sex work in the past six months, compared to 34 in the group as a whole (3 per cent), but 10 women did not answer the question about sex work and 27 did not answer about injecting.

**Table 35 : Sexual identity of people with whom respondents injected drugs during the past six months**

	1996 Number <sup>a</sup>	1998 Number <sup>a</sup>	2000 Number <sup>a</sup>
Gay/bi man	40	22	15
Heterosexual man	26	20	7
Heterosexual woman	28	5	1
Bi woman <sup>b</sup>	0	11	1
Lesbian	41	31	9
None of the above	1	—	—
Not answered	1	7	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>35</b>

(a) Categories are not mutually exclusive.

(b) Category not offered in 1996.

Of the 15 women who had injected drugs with a gay/bi man, five had also had sex with a gay/bi man, so there is some overlap between sexual and drug-using behaviour with gay or bisexual men in the past six months.

Of the 35 injectors, 15 reported that they had shared any injecting equipment in the past six months. Fourteen sharers indicated at least one category of person with whom they had shared; four had shared with a gay or bisexual man and six with a lesbian. Equipment shared is shown in Table 36.

**Table 36 : Injecting equipment shared by women who reported any sharing**

	1998	2000
Water	22	13
Spoon	17	12
Swab	3	7
Barrel	4	5
Needle	12	5
Tourniquet	14	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>15</b>

## 6 Results: HIV, STDs and hepatitis C

### HIV

A majority (639; 57 per cent) of the women had been tested for HIV. This is a high rate of testing among women, though testing was less common, and the last test less recent, than among gay men in the Periodic Survey (unpublished 2000 data, NCHSR); 65 per cent of the women who had been tested were last tested over a year ago compared with 33 per cent among the men.

Six women reported that they were HIV-positive. Three were lesbians, one bisexual, and two straight; two had had sex with a gay/bi man more than six months ago, none recently and four never. These results have been consistent over the 1998 and 2000 surveys.

### Sexually transmissible diseases

Thirty-two women (3 per cent) said they had had an STD in the past six months; 41 did not answer the question. The STDs they named are listed in Table 37. An additional three women named an STD after responding 'no' to or not answering the question about the last six months; perhaps they simply did not notice the yes/no part of the question, or had had an STD more than six months ago, or did not regard the disorder they named (two bacterial vaginosis, one warts) as an STD. Of the 82 women who answered 'yes' to the separate question 'Have you ever had genital herpes?', 63 said they had not had an STD in the past six months (45 did not respond to one or both of the questions). This clearly indicates that herpes, though the total prevalence is low (7 per cent known to be infected, 1 per cent reporting it in the past 6 months), is the most prevalent STD for women in the survey.

**Table 37 : Sexually transmissible diseases reported in the past six months**

STD	1998	2000
Herpes	11	12
Warts	3	3
Gardnerella	2	0
Thrush	1	3
Chlamydia	1	4
Gonorrhoea	0	1
Other <sup>a</sup>	2	0
Not stated	37	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>55<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>32<sup>c</sup></b>

(a) One woman claimed she had had them all.

(b) Does not add up to 55 because one woman had both gardnerella and thrush and another had gardnerella and warts.

(c) Does not add up to 32 because one woman had both thrush and herpes.

## Hepatitis A, B and C

Testing and positivity rates for hepatitis A, B and C are shown in Table 38.

**Table 38 : Number of women tested and found positive for hepatitis A, B and C, 2000**

	Tested		Number	Positive	
	Number	%		% of women tested	% of total
Hepatitis A	484	43.0	12	2.5	1.1
Hepatitis B	562	50.0	13	2.3	1.2
Hepatitis C	503	44.7	36	7.2	3.2

## 7 Discussion

The 1996 survey was 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 surveying women in social contact with gay men it was extremely successful, as 95 per cent of respondents had at least a little social contact with gay men. The same is true of the repeat surveys in 1998 and 2000.

### Generalisability

It is impossible to be certain that the respondents to this survey are a representative sample of the somewhat fuzzy category 'women in contact with Sydney's gay and lesbian community'. Such a group cannot be identified and then randomly selected for study. The women recruited at the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Fair Day or the social events differed from those recruited at clinics and community groups, who are more likely to include people with health problems or special needs. Thus this study gives a more balanced picture of women in contact with the gay and lesbian community in general than would a study based only on recruitment through clinics and community groups.

### Sexual identity and preference

In terms of sexual identity, 61 per cent thought of themselves as lesbian/homosexual, 11 per cent as bisexual and 26 per cent as heterosexual/straight; 3 per cent identified as 'other' or gave no answer. Behaviour, i.e. gender of partners, did not correlate perfectly with identity. For example, 13 per cent of the straight women reported ever having had sex with a woman, and 60 per cent of the lesbians reported ever having had sex with a man. 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. The findings also confirm that women's sexual behaviour and how they identify themselves may change over the years.

There were more bisexuals and fewer lesbians in the youngest age group. This may be because bisexuality as a stated orientation is a developmental one that women move away from, or it may be that social pressure to adopt a lesbian rather than a bisexual, queer or fluid identity has been heavier, or has had longer to operate, for the older age cohorts. There were also more straight younger women in the sample.

### Sexual relationships

One stereotype—that lesbians have fewer partners than gay men—is borne out by the results. Of 544 women (48 per cent of the total) who were in a relationship with another woman, only 42 (8 per cent; 4 per cent of the total) said they currently also have casual sex. This percentage



is much lower than among the men in the Sydney Gay Community Periodic Survey, among whom only 29 per cent were in a relationship with one regular male partner only; 37 per cent of men more than one regular partner and/or also had sex with casual partners, an arrangement which was rare among the women.

## **Sex with gay or bisexual men**

A major concern motivating this research was the possible HIV 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 43 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 current partner might have sex with men.

Although more heterosexual than bisexual women had recently had sex with heterosexual men (76 per cent of straight women, 56 per cent of bisexual women), bisexual women were many times more likely than straight women to have recently had sex with gay or bisexual men (19 per cent of bisexual women, 4 per cent of straight women). This indicates that bisexual groups, websites etc. may be a useful locus in which to provide safe-sex information and support.

Thirty-four women (3 per cent of the total group) 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, and not all regular partners had clear agreements about safe sex outside the relationship.

How many gay or bi men have sex with women? Among 1954 men in the Sydney Gay Community Periodic Survey conducted at the same time as this survey, 91 (4.7 per cent) had had vaginal or anal intercourse with one or more women in the past six months. In terms of sexual identity, 92 per cent of the 1954 men considered themselves gay, 5 per cent bisexual, 1 per cent heterosexual and 1 per cent 'other'. Two per cent of the gay men and 39 per cent of the bisexual, heterosexual or 'other' men had had sex with a woman. As these men had to have had sex with a man in the past five years to be eligible for inclusion in the Periodic Survey, but any woman could respond to SWASH, the men's and women's figures are not directly comparable. However, as about three quarters of the men and women were recruited at the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Fair Day and other mixed social venues, they are clearly moving in related social circles, at least as far as community events are concerned.

## **Injecting drug use**

Injecting drug use in the past six months (2 per cent among the Fair Day respondents) was lower than in previous surveys (8 per cent 1996; 5 per cent 1998), but is still higher in this group than in the Australian population in general (0.8 per cent) (AIHW 1998). It is lower ( $P < 0.001$ ) than the level of 5.2 per cent found among men sampled at Fair Day in the Sydney Gay Community Periodic Survey at the same time (unpublished data, NCHSR). Women who

had done sex work were more likely than others to have injected drugs. Recreational drug use and injecting drug use are issues of concern for the gay and lesbian community.

## Lesbians and HIV risk

Three fifths of the respondents to this survey were lesbians. Lesbians have been almost entirely ignored as a 'risk group' in HIV policy discourse in Australia, although there has been a small amount of HIV/AIDS prevention work with lesbians, aimed both at injecting drug users (such as ACON's Gay and Lesbian Injecting Drug Use Project) and at possible sexual transmission (such as the attendance of 'Safe Sex Sluts' handing out safe sex packs and supplies including dental dams, gloves, lubricant and condoms at lesbian community functions). The *Informer* lesbian sex book (Bergin 1999) was developed for lesbians and women who have sex with women, covering information on HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, sexual practices, drug use, relationships, pregnancy and treatments. Many epidemiologists would argue that even these modest interventions are more than is warranted (or perhaps that the prevention work has been extremely effective), as there have been no documented cases of woman-to-woman sexual transmission of HIV in Australia and only a handful reported in the world (Kennedy et al. 1995). But 'minimal risk from sex between women' is not the same as 'minimal risk for women identifying as lesbians'. Most people select sexual partners from their social networks (Laumann et al. 1994), and the same is true of drug use (Neaigus et al. 1994). Behaviour such as sex with women should not be seen as a discrete individual activity but rather as embedded in a social setting. This point is made by Friedman et al., who argue that methodological individualism in American research into drug users has led to a failure to realise that lesbians—conceptualised simplistically as 'women who have sex with women' (in itself a low-risk activity for HIV transmission)—could be at greater HIV risk than other women (Friedman et al. 1998, 1999). Other United States researchers have made the same point (Chu et al. 1992, Marmor et al. 1998, Young et al. 2000).

Naturally it would not be a good thing if people who had previously thought of lesbians as at low or no risk from HIV changed their view to regard *a//*lesbians as at higher risk than other women. Since early in the epidemic AIDS Councils and other HIV prevention workers have argued that it was not being a member of a perceived risk group (such as gay men) that put a person at risk, but rather the person's behaviour. For example, a gay man is not at risk simply by being a gay man, if neither he nor his partner has sex with anyone else, or if he is celibate. And a man who identifies as straight is not protected by that identity if he has sex with gay men who are part of a community in which infection rates are high.

The conclusion to be drawn, therefore, is that educators, health care practitioners and policy makers need to distinguish between sexual identity and sexual behaviour and not assume one from the other. Correlation is not the same as equivalence.<sup>6</sup> Too often people make the unnoticed slip from 'gay or lesbian' to 'exclusively homosexually active'. We cannot tell whether lesbians and bisexual women in Australia in fact have a higher rate of HIV

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6. To complicate matters further, what women report as their identity—what 'you think of yourself as', in the words of our question—may not be what others may infer from the circumstances. Twenty-three per cent of the women identifying as 'bisexual' in our survey were in regular relationships with women. Might they not be seen by their friends, or their doctors, as self-evidently lesbian?

infection than other women, because official HIV diagnosis reports do not record sexual identity/orientation.

### **Differences between the 1996, 1998 and 2000 surveys**

The main changes in recruitment were the addition in 1998 of the social venues, including pubs and clubs, and the omission of needle and syringe points from the clinic category in 2000. Respondents from the groups and clinics included more bisexual and heterosexual women. Fair Day respondents included more lesbians. The respondents from the social venues were roughly similar to the sample as a whole. The categories of venue did not appear to contain women with different levels of attachment to gay and lesbian community; women in all categories had roughly the same number of gay men as friends. Naturally, the social venues category (which included gay pubs) contained more women who had visited a gay bar. Those recruited in groups were less likely to have attended a gay bar.

The distribution of respondents by age and by region of residence was roughly the same in the three surveys. However, the 1998 sample had somewhat lower levels of education than the 1996 and 2000 samples, though still high compared to the population at large. The 1998 sample also had a correspondingly lower proportion in professional jobs and a higher proportion in paraprofessional jobs than in 1996. Occupation was not asked in the 2000 survey.

There were slightly more lesbians in 1998 than in 1996 and 2000, and fewer heterosexuals. The proportion of women who had had sex with a gay or bisexual man (recently or ever) was lower in 2000 than in the previous surveys. In 2000, the proportion reporting sex with men was higher and with women lower than in 1998. (Unfortunately, the questions about sex with straight men and with women cannot be compared with 1996 because of the ambiguity of some replies.) The numbers of women in regular relationships with gay or bisexual men were too small for any year comparisons to be meaningful. We would need much larger numbers and a longer period between surveys to detect any long-term change in the safety of women's sexual practice.

Overall, comparing the Fair Day subsamples, the surveys from 1996 to 2000 do not show any changes in sexual risk practice that cannot be attributed to the increase in the proportion of heterosexual respondents. The one striking change is the drop in the proportion of women reporting injecting drug use in the past six months (8 per cent in 1996; 5 per cent in 1998; 2 per cent in 2000). If this represents a real drop in injecting drug use among women in contact with the gay and lesbian community, the reasons for it are not known.

# Summary

In Australia, HIV infection rates among women have remained low compared to those among men. Nonetheless, sex with a man remains the main risk for HIV transmission to women. During 2000, 76 women were newly diagnosed with HIV infection in Australia, 69 of them through heterosexual contact and 5 through injecting drug use.

Compared with other women in Sydney, women in contact with the gay and lesbian community have higher rates of injecting drug use. If they have sex with men, these men are more likely to be gay or bisexual. For a case of so-called 'heterosexual' transmission of HIV to occur, neither person need be heterosexual!

- In February 2000 at Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Fair Day, 883 women completed a 2-page self-complete survey questionnaire; a further 242 were recruited through other groups, venues and clinics in contact with gay, bisexual and lesbian communities (total 1125 women).
- 95 per cent of respondents said that at least a few of their friends were gay or homosexual men; 24 per cent said most or all of their friends were gay men
- 75 per cent had attended a gay or lesbian bar or gay/lesbian dance party in the past 6 months
- Ages ranged from 16 to 68 (median age 31) and 72 per cent had post-school education.
- 61 per cent thought of themselves as lesbian/dyke/homosexual/gay, 11 per cent as bisexual and 26 per cent as heterosexual/straight. 3 per cent chose the 'other' category or did not answer.
- 16 respondents (1.4%) were transgender/trannies.
- 812 women (72%) had ever had sex with a woman; 642 women (57%) had done so in the past 6 months. Of those 642, 40 (6%) had used a dental dam in the past 6 months, but 30 of them had done so only once.
- 231 women (21%) said they had ever had sex with a man they knew to be gay or bisexual; 43 women (4%) had done so in the past 6 months.
- Four (<1%) of the lesbians said they had had sex with a gay or bi man in the past 6 months, as had 12 (4%) of the heterosexual women and 23 (19%) of the bisexual women.
- 34 women had had unprotected vaginal or anal sex with a male gay or bi partner (regular or casual) in the past 6 months.
- 34 women (3%) had done sex work at some time in the past 6 months.
- 35 women (3%) had injected drugs in the past 6 months. Fair Day respondents: 2%; respondents from clinics, groups and venues: 7%.
- 15 women had shared injecting equipment with someone; 4 had shared with a gay or bi man and 6 with a lesbian.

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# Appendix

See over for Sydney Women and Sexual Health Brief Survey 2000.

ACON: AIDS Council of New South Wales

National Centre in HIV Social Research  
University of New South Wales

National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research  
University of New South Wales

## Sydney Women and Sexual Health Brief Survey 2000

*Your responses are very important to us. Please do not complete if you have already done so this year.*

1. How many of your friends are gay or homosexual men?  
None ☐ A few ☐ Some ☐ Most ☐ All ☐
2. In the past 6 months have you attended:  
a gay bar No ☐ Yes ☐  
a lesbian bar No ☐ Yes ☐  
a gay/lesbian dance party? No ☐ Yes ☐
3. Are you transgender/transsexual? No ☐ Yes ☐
4. Do you think of yourself as:  
Lesbian/dyke/homosexual/gay ☐  
Bisexual ☐  
Heterosexual/straight ☐  
Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
5. When was the last occasion that you had sex with a woman?  
Never ☐ *Go to question 10*  
Over 6 months ago ☐ *Go to question 10*  
In the past 6 months ☐ *Go on to question 6*
6. During the past 6 months, how many women have you had sex with?  
None ☐  
One ☐  
2–5 women ☐  
6–10 women ☐  
More than 10 women ☐
7. In the past 6 months, have you used a dental dam while having sex with a woman?  
Never ☐ Once ☐ Several times ☐ Every time ☐
8. In the past 6 months, have you given oral sex to a woman who was menstruating at the time?  
Yes ☐ Yes, but always with a dam ☐  
Yes, but always with a tampon ☐ No ☐

9. In the past 6 months, have you received oral sex from a woman when you were menstruating at the time?

Yes ☐ Yes, but always with a dam ☐  
Yes, but always with a tampon ☐ No ☐

10. In the past 6 months, have you had any other form of lesbian sex (such as BDSM) in which blood was involved?

Yes ☐ No ☐

11. When was the last occasion that you had sex with a man you knew to be gay, homosexual or bisexual?

Never ☐ *Go to question 13*  
Over 6 months ago ☐ *Go to question 13*  
In the past 6 months ☐ *Go on to question 12*

12. During the past 6 months, how many different gay, homosexual or bisexual men have you had sex with?

None ☐  
One ☐  
2–5 men ☐  
6–10 men ☐  
More than 10 men ☐

13. When was the last occasion that you had sex with a man you believed to be straight or heterosexual?

Never ☐ *Go to question 15*  
Over 6 months ago ☐ *Go to question 15*  
In the past 6 months ☐ *Go on to question 14*

14. During the past 6 months, how many different straight or heterosexual men have you had sex with?

None ☐  
One ☐  
2–5 men ☐  
6–10 men ☐  
More than 10 men ☐

15. Who do you enjoy having sex with?

Women only ☐  
Mostly women ☐  
Men and women equally ☐  
Mostly men ☐  
Men only ☐  
It depends/Can't compare ☐  
No one ☐  
Don't know ☐

16. During the past 6 months have you done any sex work?

No ☐ Yes ☐

17. On any occasion in the past 6 months did you have group sex which included a gay, homosexual or bisexual man?

No ☐ Yes ☐

18. Are you currently in a sexual relationship with a regular partner?

Yes—with a woman ☐  
Yes—with a man ☐  
Yes—with both ☐ No regular relationship ☐

19. Have you had casual sex in the past 6 months?

Yes—with women ☐ Yes—with men ☐  
Yes—with both ☐ No casual partners ☐

*If you have not had sex with any men, go to question 39.*

*The following questions are about casual sex with male partners who are **gay, homosexual or bisexual**. (If you have not had casual sex with a gay or bi man in the last 6 months, please go to question 28.)*

In the past 6 months which of the following have you done with any of these **casual gay/bi** male partners?

20. Oral sex: he came in my mouth  
Never ☐ Occasionally ☐ Often ☐
21. Vaginal sex with a condom  
Never ☐ Occasionally ☐ Often ☐
22. Vaginal sex without a condom but he did not come inside me  
Never ☐ Occasionally ☐ Often ☐
23. Vaginal sex without a condom and he came inside me  
Never ☐ Occasionally ☐ Often ☐
24. Anal sex with a condom  
Never ☐ Occasionally ☐ Often ☐
25. Anal sex without a condom but he did not come inside me  
Never ☐ Occasionally ☐ Often ☐
26. Anal sex without a condom and he came inside me  
Never ☐ Occasionally ☐ Often ☐

27. On any occasion in the past 6 months did you ever have sex with a gay, homosexual or bisexual man while under the influence of drugs other than alcohol?

No ☐ Yes ☐ If yes, what drugs were they?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Please turn over . . .*

*The following questions are about your **regular male partner**. (If you do not have a regular male partner, please go to question 39.)*

28. If you are in a regular relationship with a man, for how long has it been?

Less than 6 months ☐ 6–11 months ☐  
1–2 years ☐ 3–5 years ☐  
More than 5 years ☐

29. Is your regular male partner:

Gay/homosexual ☐ Bisexual ☐  
Heterosexual/straight ☐  
Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_



Don't know if he has sex with men ☐

In the past six months which of the following have you done with this regular male partner?

30. Oral sex: he came in my mouth

Never ☐ Occasionally ☐ Often ☐

31. Vaginal sex with a condom

Never ☐ Occasionally ☐ Often ☐

32. Vaginal sex without a condom but he did not come inside

Never ☐ Occasionally ☐ Often ☐

33. Vaginal sex without a condom and he came inside me

Never ☐ Occasionally ☐ Often ☐

34. Anal sex with a condom

Never ☐ Occasionally ☐ Often ☐

35. Anal sex without a condom but he did not come inside

Never ☐ Occasionally ☐ Often ☐

36. Anal sex without a condom and he came inside me

Never ☐ Occasionally ☐ Often ☐

*If you are in a regular relationship with a **gay, homosexual or bisexual man**, please complete these questions.*

37. Do you know the result of your regular male partner's HIV test?

Yes—positive ☐ Yes—negative ☐

I don't know/He hasn't had a test ☐

38. Do you have a clear agreement with your regular male partner about him having sex with other men?

No ☐ Yes ☐

What is that agreement?

No agreement ☐

He must have no sex at all with men ☐

He must have no anal sex with men ☐

He must always use condoms for anal sex with men ☐

He can have anal sex without a condom ☐

39. During the past 6 months have you ever injected drugs?

No ☐ Go to question 43

Yes ☐ Go on to question 40

40. Have you done this when you were with someone who was a:

gay/homosexual/bisexual man ☐

straight/heterosexual man ☐

straight/heterosexual woman ☐

bisexual woman ☐ lesbian ☐

41. Did you ever share any injecting equipment?

No ☐ Yes ☐

If yes, what equipment did you share?

water ☐ barrel ☐

spoon ☐ needle ☐

swab ☐ tourniquet ☐

42. If you have shared injecting equipment in the past 6 months, have you done this with someone who was:

a gay/homosexual/bisexual man ☐

a straight/heterosexual man ☐

a straight/heterosexual woman ☐

bisexual woman ☐ a lesbian ☐

43. Have you ever had genital herpes?

No ☐ Yes ☐

44. Have you had an STD in the last 6 months?

No ☐ Yes ☐

Which one(s)? \_\_\_\_\_

45. Have you ever had a test for HIV (the AIDS virus)?

No ☐ Go to question 48 Yes ☐

46. When were you last tested for HIV?

Less than a week ago ☐

1–4 weeks ago ☐

1–6 months ago ☐

7–12 months ago ☐

1–2 years ago ☐

2–4 years ago ☐

More than 4 years ago ☐

47. What was the result of your last HIV test?

Positive ☐ (You have the virus)

Negative ☐ (You do not have the virus)

Don't know ☐

48. Have you ever been tested for:

hepatitis A? No ☐ Yes ☐

hepatitis B? No ☐ Yes ☐

hepatitis C ? No ☐ Yes ☐

49. What was the result of your last test for

hepatitis A? Positive ☐ Negative ☐ Don't know ☐

hepatitis B ? Positive ☐ Negative ☐ Don't know ☐

hepatitis C ? Positive ☐ Negative ☐ Don't know ☐

*Finally, we need a few details to compare with other studies.*

50. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_ years

51. Are you: (Tick all that apply to you.)

Employed full-time ☐

Employed part-time ☐

Unemployed ☐

A student ☐

A pensioner or on social security benefits ☐

Doing domestic duties ☐

Not in the work force ☐

52. Do you have any dependent children?

No ☐ Yes ☐

53. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

Primary school only ☐

Up to 3 years of high school ☐

Year 10/School Certificate ☐

Year 12/HSC ☐

Tertiary diploma or trade certificate ☐

University or CAE degree ☐

54. Where do you live?

Postcode or Suburb/town \_\_\_\_\_

55. What is your ethnic or cultural background? *e.g. Aboriginal, Greek, Vietnamese, Lebanese, Chinese*

Anglo-Australian only ☐

Other ☐ (please specify)

\_\_\_\_\_

*Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.*

*Don't forget to answer the questions on the back of the information sheet.*