STIGMATIZED SEX
Barriers to Health for Gay, Bisexual, and Other Men who Have Sex with Men (gbMSM)

DARREN HO, PROGRAM MANAGER, CBRC
Presentation Overview

1. Why gbMSM health? Why talk so much about context?

2. Social context theory and research on gbMSM health: syndemics, minority stress

3. gbMSM health responses: a brief overview

4. Working with gbMSM: considerations for clinicians, educators, and other providers
A Note on Language
My Story -- Coming out to my Family Doctor
Why gay, bi, Two-Spirit, queer, and other men who have sex with men (gbMSM)?

- gbMSM health in the context of broad social progress (e.g. marriage equality, human rights protections)

- A couple other relatively recent milestones:
  - Homosexuality decriminalized in 1969
  - Declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder (1973, American Psychiatric Association; 1990, World Health Organization)

Biomedical advances in HIV prevention (e.g. U=U/TasP, PrEP/PEP)
gbMSM Health Outcomes

Trauma experienced through bullying, harassment, violence, rejection

Shame, stigma, distress, minority stress, depression & anxiety

Very high rates of attempted suicide

Very high rates of substance use & abuse & smoking

Very high rates of partner violence

Very high rates of STIs & HIV
14. **New HIV diagnoses in BC by exposure category - total, 2005 to 2014**

The diagram illustrates the number of HIV diagnoses by exposure category in British Columbia from 2005 to 2014. The categories include MSM (men who have sex with men), PWD (people who inject drugs), HET (heterosexual contact), Other, and NIR/UNK (no identified risk/exposure unknown).

- **MSM** diagnoses show a trend from 181 in 2005 to 150 in 2014.
- **PWD** diagnoses range from 125 in 2005 to 25 in 2014.
- **HET** diagnoses decrease from 82 in 2005 to 25 in 2014.
- **Other** diagnoses fluctuate with a peak of 12 in 2006 and a low of 2 in 2009.
- **NIR/UNK** diagnoses also fluctuate, with a peak of 4 in 2005 and a low of 2 in 2014.

The table below the diagram provides the specific numbers of diagnoses year by year.
Why is HIV so prevalent among gbMSM?

- increased per-act probability of HIV transmission for penile-anal sex
- higher rates of men living with HIV in gay sexual networks
- sex education programming that is silent on gay men’s sexuality
- profound societal stigma towards HIV and gay men (syndemics)

Health care providers should continue to work with gbMSM in ways that acknowledge, rather than shame, risk taking.
Unpacking the Social Context: Syndemics

- Syndemics theory (term developed by Merrill Singer in mid-1990s, applied to HIV and gay men by Dr. Ron Stall and colleagues at University of Pittsburgh)
- (n.) a cluster of epidemics that act additively to predict other epidemics
- (adj.) of or pertaining to such a cluster
Syndemics

- Multiple dangerous epidemics afflict (urban?) gbMSM communities; each of them important and each interacting with the other.
- These epidemics interact to drive HIV risk and HIV infection among gbMSM.
- Progress on fighting any one of these epidemics is likely to be limited by lack of progress in fighting other interactive epidemics in tandem.
Maybe it’s not homosexuality...

• Maybe it’s homophobia?
  • Violence victimization of young gbMSM is commonplace
  • Violence victimization in adolescence predicts poor health outcomes among the general population, including gbMSM
  • The experience of homophobic attacks at a very early age may be a root cause of syndemics within gbMSM communities
  • Importance of resilience and social networks
Minority Stress (Dr. Ilan Meyer, UCLA)
- “chronically high levels of stress faced by members of stigmatized minority groups”
- Interpersonal prejudice and discrimination
- Poor social support, low SES
Protective Factors Among gbMSM?

- Family connectedness, teacher caring, other adult caring, and perceived safety at school (for younger gay men) (*American Journal of Public Health*, 99(1), 110-7)

- Levels of protective factors are generally higher among bisexual men than among gay respondents (*American Journal of Public Health*, 99(1), 110-7)

- Sense of Coherence (*Anxiety Stress Coping*, 27(6):662-77)


The gbMSM Experience
Gay men are leaders in preventing HIV

- Strategic Positioning
- Serosorting
- Condom use
- Regular testing
- ARV use/TasP
- PEP/PrEP use
gbMSM Health Promotion:
– programming, research, strategy

- **Core values**: self-determination, meaningful community involvement, harm reduction, intersectionality
- **Targeted, tailored interventions**: sexual health centres and social marketing campaigns; mental health programming including individual and group counselling, peer and professional delivery models
- **Research & funding**: dedicated provincial, federal funding to sustain knowledge exchange
- **Policy & strategy**: BC - Provincial Health Officer’s Report (2014); gbMSM Health Network – Regional Progress Cards; National – Pan-Canadian GBT2Q Alliance on Combination Prevention
Gay Men’s Health is more than HIV.
PHO Priorities

1) BC Gay Men’s Health Strategy
2) Healthy Schools
3) Prevention Scale Up (access/competency)
4) Mental Health & Substance Use (access/competency)
5) Combat prosecutorial guidelines for HIV criminalization
6) Increase research/surveillance/data
In Northern Health, 60% of MSM are NOT out to their healthcare provider. This is the highest proportion in BC (Interior = 41%, Island = 40%, VCH = 19%).

MSM who are not out to their healthcare provider are 10x less likely to have received an HIV test in the last year. – Sex Now 2015

“I don’t see many gay men in the North.”

The BC CDC estimates that 2,200 MSM live in the Northern Health authority. That same report estimates that number is under-reported, and could be 30 – 40% higher (BC CDC/PAN Key Population Size Estimate Project 2016)

In Northern Health, only 58% of MSM identify as ‘gay’, while 37% identify as ‘bi’, 6% identify as ‘straight’ and 5% identify as ‘queer’

24% reported condomless anal sex with unknown partners, 44% reported not being tested for HIV in the last year, 23% have NEVER had an HIV test, 48% were unaware of Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) and 55% were unaware of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) – Sex Now, 2015
Working with gbMSM

Some things to note:

1. Most people receive little education about gender or sexual diversity.
2. Speaking about gender variance or any kind of sexuality is uncomfortable for most people.
3. Sexual orientation and gender identity are defined by the person not the provider.
4. Mental health symptoms and syndromes result from minority stress, impacting sexual behaviour.
5. Primary care must be accessible and relevant to all persons, including gbMSM.
Components of Identity

1. Gender Identity
2. Gender Expression
3. Biological Sex
4. Sexual/Romantic Attraction
Who are we?

Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Two Spirit, Trans, and other MSM

- It is not up to the provider to determine an individual’s identity for them.

Intersectional Identities

- Each individual carries multiple, overlapping identities and often more than one of them is an identity that causes them to face oppression or discrimination.
- These overlapping or interlocking identities are called “intersections” or “intersectional identities”
Intersection of cultural and gender identities

Man

Person of Colour

Living in poverty

Gay
Working With gbMSM
Understanding Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is the cultural bias in favor of opposite-sex relationships of a sexual nature. This can take many forms from marriage to music.

We live in a heteronormative society where homophobia and violence represent the extreme elements.

Many people are attempting to change this culture. The western gay rights movement has had unprecedented successes.
Working With gbMSM
Understanding The Determinants of Gay Men’s Health

Gay men and other men that have sex with men have different determinants than other minority groups.

- Income and Social Status
- Social Support Networks
- Education and Literacy
- Employment/Working Conditions
- Social Environments
- Physical Environments
- Personal Health Practices and Coping Skills
- Healthy Child Development
- Biology and Genetic Endowment
- Health Services
- Gender
- Culture
- Stigma
- Coming Out?
Working With gbMSM
Understanding Life Course Model and the Impact of Generations

“How gay men think about themselves, their bodies and their desires is a product of social and historical time.”

Phillip Hammack, PhD, University of Santa Cruz

“The life course model helps account for the impacts of significant and ongoing political and social change towards gay men on the lives and health of gay men.”
Generations Theory

Health determinants for gay men are not static, and are linked to / originate from the generation they are born into:

Stigma Generation (born in the 1930s):
- transformation of gay identity from diagnosable mental illness to legitimate social identity
- witness to the entire AIDS epidemic; survivors

Stonewall Generation (born in the 1940s):
- first generation to experience gay liberation in late adolescence / early adulthood
- longer period of their life course free from stigma and criminalization of gay sex
- Like Stigma Generation, witnessed devastation of AIDS epidemic firsthand
- Experienced profound setbacks to gay liberation movement

AIDS 1 generation (born in the 1950s and 1960s)
- “probably the hardest hit by AIDS, given that they were at the peak of their sexually active lives when it was emerging”
- “it was like living in a war zone for this generation, with outwardly healthy and attractive men in their 20s and 30s falling ill and dying in a matter of weeks”
Generations Theory cont.

AIDS 2 generation (born in the 1970s)

experienced childhood and adolescence at a time when the AIDS epidemic was often conflated with gay sex, disease and death

did not, however, experience the same personal losses as members of the AIDS 1 generation

Awareness of risk, vigilance in condom use; safer sex practices

Internet emerges, treatment advances gradually transformed collective consciousness of HIV/AIDS from a lethal illness to a chronic, manageable health condition
discourse shift from AIDS to issues such as marriage equality and human rights protections

Post-AIDS or marriage equality generation (born in the 1980s and ’90s)

Growing up under radically different social and political contexts than all previous generations

“They are the first generation to now experience their same-sex desires absent the same fear of AIDS that consumed members of my generation when we were beginning to have sex”

Coming of age in an era of unprecedented advances in rights and equality for GSM individuals and communities (also technology: internet, apps, social media)
Barriers to Care

gbMSM frequently withhold information about orientation, gender, sexual practices and behavioural risks

Many health providers are uncomfortable, reluctant or undertrained to take sexual history

Some health providers will treat us just like ‘everyone else’ – but we actually have specific health needs

How health providers communicate with our patients can improve their engagement in care and thus improve their health outcomes
How healthcare providers ‘show-up’ impacts care

What you know
- HIV prevention tools
- Understanding social determinants & context

How you talk
- Asset-based vs. deficit-based
- How do we talk about risk?

How you deliver care

Challenging HIV and sexual stigma
Taking a Sexual History

“Do you have sex with men, women, or both?”

Use general terms such as ‘partner’(s) or ‘significant other’(s)

Aim for inclusivity, avoid assumption

Married does not mean monogamous

Sexual orientation is not equivocal to sexual activity

Don’t assume condoms, means ‘safe’ or ‘protected’.

Ask about activities including oral, anal, digital, vaginal, use of shared sex toys
# Inclusive & Destigmatizing Language

PacificAIDSNetwork.org -> Resources -> Tools for Organizations -> Guide to Inclusive and Destigmatizing Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avoid saying...</th>
<th>Instead try...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Infect or spread ex. Youth can be infected through sex</td>
<td>Pass ex. HIV can be passed through unprotected vaginal, anal, or frontal sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infected with HIV or suffers from HIV</td>
<td>Living with HIV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gendered descriptions ex. Female condoms ex. Pap smears are an important part of health care for women</td>
<td>Body parts or actions ex. Insertive condoms ex. Pap smears are an important part of health care for people with a cervix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitution</td>
<td>Sex work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junkies, addicts, alcoholic</td>
<td>People who use drugs, people experiencing addiction, people with a substance use disorder (depending on what we’re talking about; note, most of us use drugs whether that be caffeine, nicotine, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean/dirty used to describe equipment or people</td>
<td>To describe people — abstinent, not using/actively using</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To describe equipment (e.g. needles) — new, unused/used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homosexual; transsexual; identity-based slurs</td>
<td>Terms people use to self-identify ex. gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, pansexual, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“AIDS” or “HIV/AIDS” when referring to HIV ex. It is important to get tested for AIDS ex. Died from HIV/AIDS</td>
<td>HIV ex. It is important to get tested for HIV ex. Died from AIDS-related complications; died from opportunistic Infections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
AIDS
IS STILL AROUND
1981–
I MUST BE IMMUNE.

HE'S A TOP.
TOPS CAN'T
GET IT.

HOW DO YOU KNOW
WHAT YOU KNOW?

HOW DO YOU KNOW
WHAT YOU KNOW?

www.gaylife.org
813-813-0088

www.gaylife.org
470-813-0088
Invisibility and Coming Out

Assumption that LGBT people can be spotted

  ◦ However, many are not identifiable

People need safe opportunities to disclose and safe spaces to be out

  Having identifiable LGBT2S staff, signage, reading materials, etc. may make it easier for clients to be out

Confidentiality

  Ensure privacy and discuss confidentiality before asking about potentially sensitive information
A Safe Space

“It’s not enough to know in your own head and say, “Oh, I’m okay with it.” You’ve got to indicate that to me. Because I’ve been through so much homophobia that I am not going to take it for granted that you’re okay with me. ... I still don’t assume that people are okay with me, or with us.”

(Health Care Professional, Vancouver)
Optimizing Care for Gay, Bisexual, and other Men who have Sex with Men

gb MSM

Learn to identify common health issues experienced by gb MSM patients and their implications for care. Move beyond sexual health into more complex topics through multi-layered case studies and interactive exercises.

ubccpd.ca/gbmsm-online

⏰ ~90 minutes  🕰️ 1.5 Mainpro+
Thank You!

DARREN.HO@CBRC.NET

WWW.CBRC.NET