

MSM CONSULTATION STIMULATES ACTION TO ADDRESS "THE OVERLOOKED EPIDEMIC"

Men who have sex with men (MSM) are highly vulnerable to HIV and represent a significant but hidden driver of the epidemic in many African countries. Unfortunately, stigmatization and even criminalization of homosexual behavior, as well as denial of the existence of MSM, has resulted in programs and policies that essentially ignore their prevention and treatment needs.

To address these issues, the Population Council's Kenya office and the Kenya National AIDS Control Council (NACC) held a regional consultation titled, *The Overlooked Epidemic: Addressing HIV Prevention and Treatment among Men Who Have Sex with Men in Sub-Saharan Africa*. This unprecedented meeting

sought to heighten discussion of MSM at the national and regional levels and to formulate a research, policy, and programmatic agenda to ensure quality HIV prevention, testing, and treatment services for MSM. More than 60 representatives from 16 countries convened in Nairobi on May 14–15 to share existing research, innovative pilot programs, and advocacy efforts, and to outline key recommendations for a multisectoral response to HIV among MSM. Proceedings, which summarize key findings and lessons learned and outline future priorities for research and programs, are documented in a joint Population Council-Kenya NACC publication (expected early 2009).

The consultation has generated interest from policymakers, researchers, advocates, programmers, and donors worldwide. Participants from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, and Rwanda have



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Attendees at the "The Overlooked Epidemic: Addressing HIV Prevention and Treatment among Men Who Have Sex with Men in Sub-Saharan Africa," held in Nairobi on May 14–15, 2008.

coordination in their respective countries, and the meeting was highlighted on the UNAIDS website (www.unaids.org). NACC officials have received praise for being the first African HIV coordinating government body to convene such a “groundbreaking” meeting.

Drawing upon insights from the meeting, Council staff conducting MSM research have identified the following priorities for the HIV and AIDS Program:

- **Characterizing the sexual networks and negotiation of safer sex practices of MSM to “make high risk sex less risky”.** A new study funded by the Ford Foundation will use quantitative behavioral surveillance to enumerate MSM and MSM sex workers in Nigeria and South Africa, and to describe their HIV risks, practices, and beliefs. Also in Nigeria a new, CDC-funded intervention will create “MSM friendly” clinics to improve knowledge of risk practices, reduce barriers to STI detection and treatment, modify care-seeking behaviors, and promote individual and group assistance through supportive social networks.
- **Determining the ways in which mental health and other psychosocial factors influence MSM risk behavior.** A new, amFAR-funded project in South Africa will examine HIV misinformation and conspiracy beliefs, mistrust in medical providers and institutions, and HIV-related sexual risk behaviors among MSM.
- **Investigating the biomedical properties of, access to, and behavioral dynamics surrounding lubricant use.** In Kenya, the Council is seeking support for an epidemiological impact and cost-effectiveness study of water-based lubrication distribution to MSM sex workers. Future biomedical research at the Council’s laboratories in New York may include studies on the safety of lubricants for use in the rectum, development of a rectal microbicide, and studies involving MSM to improve the measurement of the efficacy of microbicide compounds.

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