

Scene but unseen: migrant gay men

September 2008 sees the launch of a programme of work targeting men who have sex with men who have migrated to England and Wales to help reduce their vulnerability to HIV and poor sexual health.

Background

Men who have sex with men who immigrate to England and Wales can be left vulnerable to HIV exposure by their economic and social circumstances, not just a lack of knowledge around HIV and sexual health.

But migrant gay men are as diverse a group as the countries and cultures they come from. Data from the Gay Men's Sex Survey 2003, *On the move*,¹ shows that men come from well over 100 countries. Some have higher educational qualifications and good English language skills. Such highly qualified men have few problems fitting into UK society and are generally less vulnerable.

Others have lower educational qualifications and a limited command of English. Research suggests this group have more unmet and pressing HIV prevention needs.² It is this group that is the focus of the programme of work.

Men often migrate or flee to Britain in search of a more liberated life, a place where they can be more open about their sexuality, while staying safe from the homophobic abuse they may have faced in their home countries. But what they face when they arrive can lead to a very different story from the one they had hoped for.

Newly found liberation can lead to an outburst of sexual encounters and an increase in sexual risk taking, and with it, increased exposure to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Survey data has shown 9.4% of migrant gay men tested positive for HIV, compared with 5.9% of UK-born gay men.³

There are other factors that make these men vulnerable. The gay community is reported by men as offering few supportive social contacts. Perceived as over-sexualised, the gay 'scene' does not necessarily help men build on their social or personal capital.



Poor English language skills can hamper finding work or even socialising. Men may well also have uncertainties surrounding their immigration status. It is not uncommon for men to find themselves relying on sexual partners to provide accommodation and food. Both poor language skills and an unequal balance of power in such relationships can make it difficult for men to negotiate safer sex.

Migrant MSM are often unaware of where to turn to for support, or what they are entitled to in terms of healthcare, immigration advice, social security benefits and so on.



However, these issues are faced by many other immigrants to the UK, gay or not. So, what puts men who have sex with men especially at risk? Why are they not benefiting fully from existing support services?

When living in a foreign country many naturally turn to expatriate communities for support and advice, and there are many grass-root community organisations in existence. However, homophobic views within such communities towards gay men are often the reason why men have migrated in the first place. Men have regularly suffered abuse, violence and even torture from people in their home countries, including family members. It is easy to understand why they feel unsure about turning to their communities when looking for support in their new lives in the UK. Additionally men will be unused to, or even afraid, of discussing their sexuality because it was dangerous to do so in their home countries.

But their practical needs must still be addressed. Learning English, increasing employment skills, finding accommodation and understanding rights and entitlements are fundamental to the men's ability to survive. Some men might prefer stronger links with the gay community, and turn to gay community organisations to meet their needs. However, migrant organisations, with their knowledge and expertise, also have an important role to play in supporting migrant gay men.



Programme of work

The 'Scene but unseen' work is directed at three audiences:

- Men who have sex with men who have migrated to England or Wales.
- Organisations delivering HIV and sexual health services to MSM.
- Organisations delivering specialist services to migrants.

Printed resources and a website are available, which aim to raise awareness of the factors that might make migrant men vulnerable to HIV and poor sexual health, whilst providing information to address these.

Gay Britain website

A website has been developed to target all three audiences. The section for migrant MSM expands on information in the 'Gay Britain' leaflets (see below) and also acts as a portal to external organisations and agencies that can provide the relevant assistance and services.

The section for organisations delivering specialist services to migrants explains why the needs of MSM can be different to those of heterosexual migrants. It also explains some of the factors that put MSM at risk of acquiring or transmitting HIV and other STIs. Advice and information on providing more 'gay friendly' services are included. There are also downloadable PDFs of guidelines and an audit tool for organisations to use to help make their services as inclusive and welcoming as possible for MSM.

Finally, the section for gay men's health organisations again focuses on raising awareness of the particular needs of migrant gay men. It also contains a downloadable version of a 'Scene but unseen' resource pack that provides a range of information to help address the needs of migrant MSM to help workers supporting migrant MSM.

www.chapsonline.org.uk/gaybritain



'Welcome to Gay Britain' leaflets

Pocket-sized concertina leaflets have been produced in six languages (English, French, Italian, Polish, Portuguese and Spanish) as 'how to survive' resources for recent arrivals. As well as containing information around HIV and sexual health, the leaflets have a guide to staying safe on the 'scene', information about how to access healthcare and benefits, where to sort out visa and immigration issues and learn English. The leaflets were designed and developed following a workshop with a group of men who had been in the UK for 3 years or less.

To order any of the leaflets, please contact Andie Dyer at Terrence Higgins Trust, email andie.dyer@ttht.org.uk

They are also available as downloadable PDFs from www.chapsonline.org.uk/gaybritain

Guidelines and audit tools for specialist migrant organisations

Guidelines have been drawn up to help migrant organisations ensure that their services are welcoming to gay and bisexual men. They offer advice around communicating with clients, issues facing migrant men, how to make an organisation 'gay friendly' and advice around developing an open attitude among staff.

There is an audit tool to accompany these guidelines that organisations can use to check how well they are doing and to identify the areas where they could make improvements.

Both resources are available by contacting Andie Dyer at Terrence Higgins Trust, email andie.dyer@ttht.org.uk or via www.chapsonline.org.uk/gaybritain



'Scene but unseen' resource pack

The resource pack is an extensive reference resource to assist staff working in HIV and sexual health and gay men's health organisations who may have migrant clients and service-users.

It contains a wide range of information around migrants' rights and entitlements to healthcare, welfare benefits, work and employment and emergency housing, as well as where to find translation and interpretation services, immigration advice and numerous contacts.

As well as containing nationwide information, the pack has space for workers to add in information and contacts for local services.

The pack is available by contacting Andie Dyer at Terrence Higgins Trust, email andie.dyer@ttht.org.uk

Notes

- (1) Reid D et al (2004) *On the move – findings from the Gay Men's Sex Survey 2003*. London, Sigma Research
- (2) Keogh P et al (2004) *Migrant gay men: Redefining community, restoring identity*. London, Sigma Research
- (3) Reid D et al (2004) *On the move – findings from the Gay Men's Sex Survey 2003*. London, Sigma Research
- (4) These languages have been selected because they reach the greatest numbers of migrant men. Sources used include *Gay Men's Sex Survey 2003* and the *International Passenger Survey*. Home Office. Control of Immigration: Statistics United Kingdom 2006

The HIV and sexual health charity for life

Website: www.ttht.org.uk THT Direct: 0845 12 21 200

Registered office: 314-320 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8DP Tel: 020 7812 1600 Email: info@ttht.org.uk