

# 'Slipping through the NET' Online education in gay men's chatrooms

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- Describe the design, implementation and outcomes of an online sexual health internet education project, “Slipping Through the NET”
- Discuss our ongoing chatroom work

# Slipping through the NET: Project aims

1. To develop an innovative education model in chatrooms for men who have sex with men
2. Provide information and support to the men about HIV transmission and the added risks associated with gonorrhoea infection
3. Develop, pilot and research the model in terms of the men's responses to our presence and the issues they want to talk about

# Background

- Increasing HIV and STIs in Victoria
- Increasing use of internet chatrooms for chatting, connecting socially, talking about sex and arranging to meet for sex
- Internet chatrooms are replacing other settings where men seek sexual partners (Tikkanen et al. 2003; Weatherburn et al. 2003)
- The internet, supports anonymity and freedom

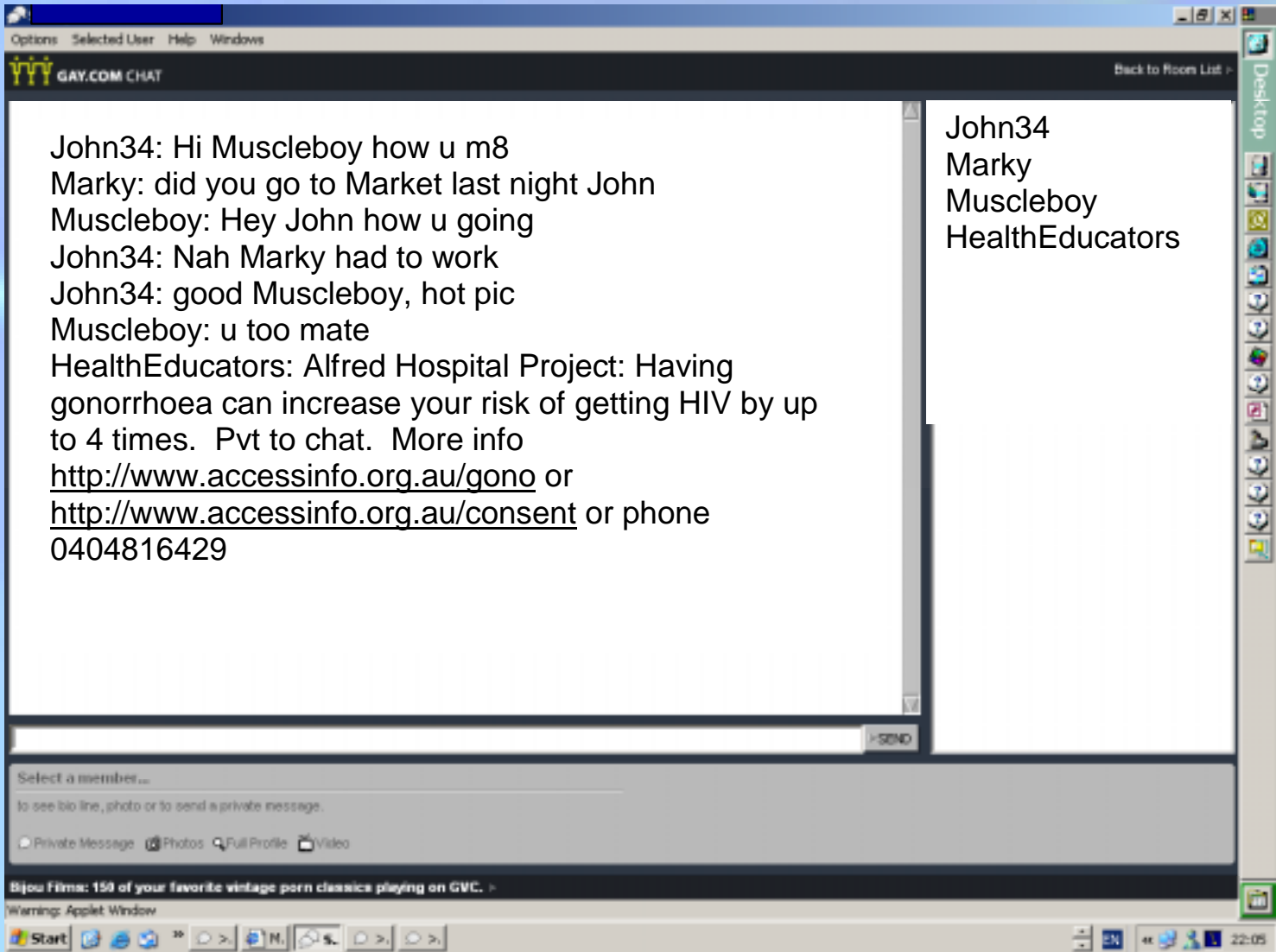
# Project design

- Strategy conducted over two six week periods, separated by a six week break
- Two educators worked for two hours online, five times each week (i.e. 10 hrs/week: 30 sessions per strategy)

## Data collected:

- Quantitative:
  - Which rooms
  - Number of men in rooms
  - Number of comments in rooms
  - Number of 'privates'
  - Demographic data
  - 'Satisfaction' data
- Qualitative: Conversation transcripts

# Main chatroom



The screenshot shows a web browser window titled "GAY.COM CHAT". The chat log on the left contains the following messages:

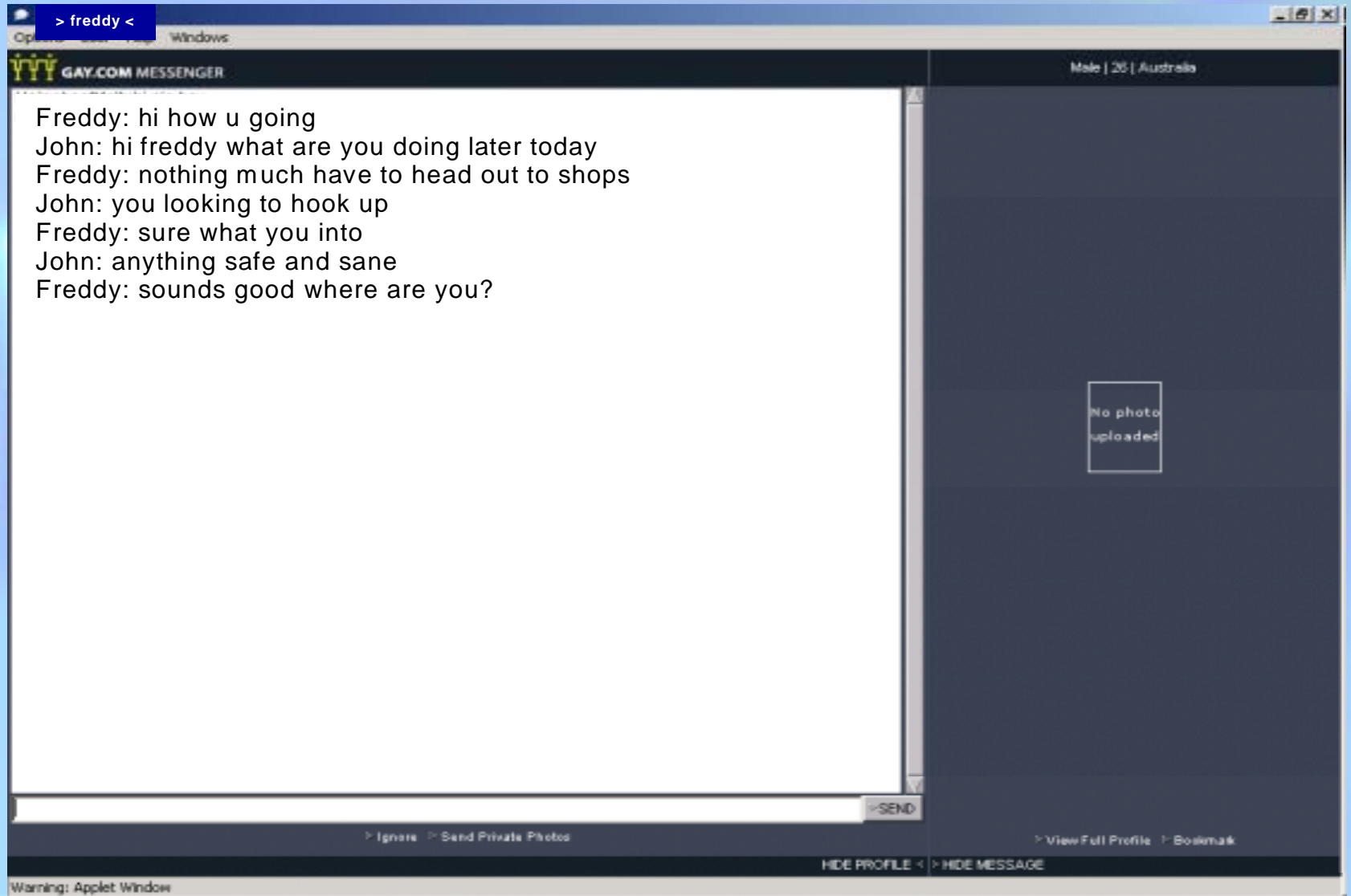
John34: Hi Muscleboy how u m8  
Marky: did you go to Market last night John  
Muscleboy: Hey John how u going  
John34: Nah Marky had to work  
John34: good Muscleboy, hot pic  
Muscleboy: u too mate  
HealthEducators: Alfred Hospital Project: Having gonorrhoea can increase your risk of getting HIV by up to 4 times. Pvt to chat. More info <http://www.accessinfo.org.au/gono> or <http://www.accessinfo.org.au/consent> or phone 0404816429

Below the chat log is a text input field with a "SEND" button. Underneath is a section for selecting a member to private message, with options for "Private Message", "Photos", "Full Profile", and "Video".

On the right side of the chat window, there is a vertical list of users: John34, Marky, Muscleboy, and HealthEducators. A "Back to Room List" link is visible at the top right of the chat area.

The bottom of the browser window shows the Windows taskbar with the Start button, several application icons, and the system tray displaying the date and time as 22:05.

# Private chat



# How many men were exposed to the message, in what rooms and at what time of day?

- 25,685 exposures to the message

Time of day	Number of exposures
• Morning (until 12noon)	3,444
• Early afternoon 12 - 3pm	4,894
• Late afternoon 3 - 5pm	9,488
• Evening after 5pm	10,959

Over half (14,693) were in the Melbourne Inner room

# Evidence that the men in the main chatrooms thought the scrolled messages were intrusive or irrelevant

- No evidence: 2 negative responses out of 639 message scrolls

## Satisfaction: message, information & support

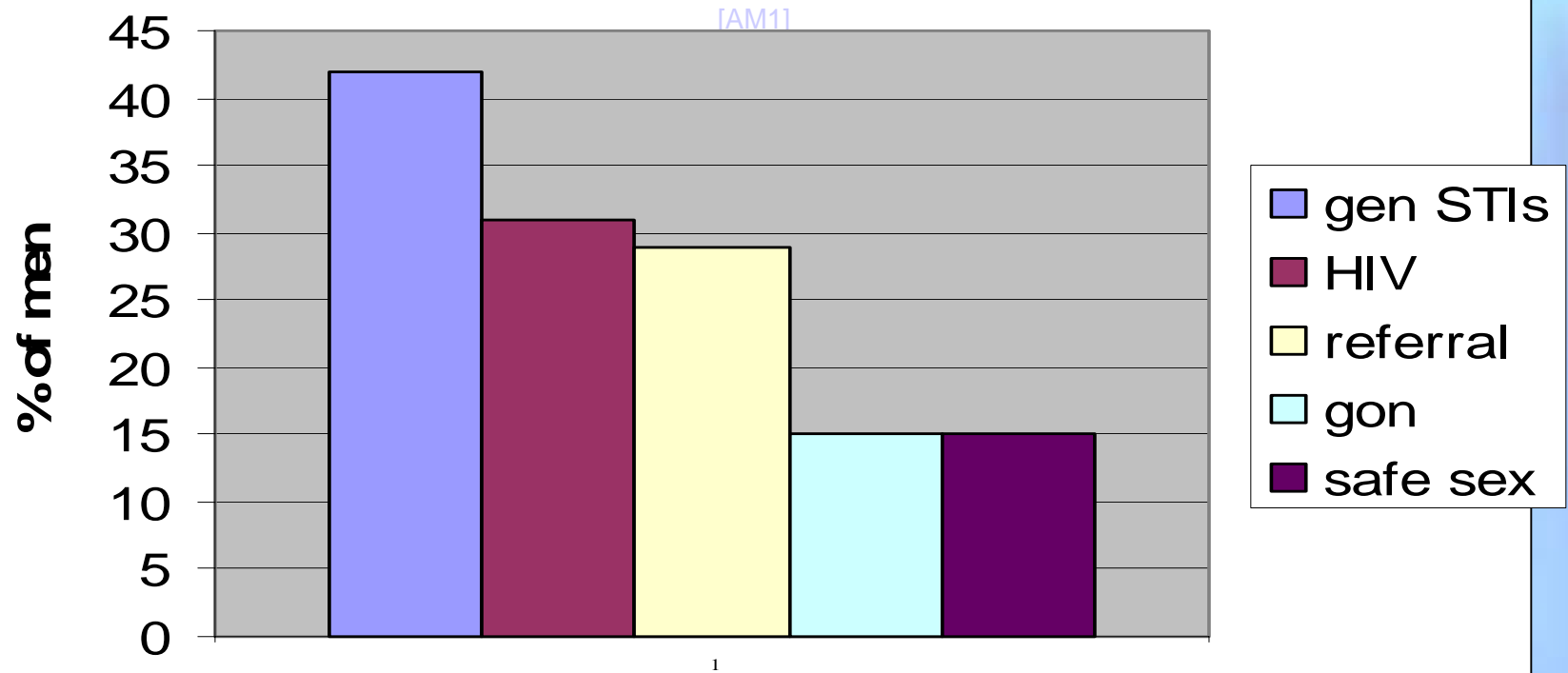
- Message: Average rating 4, higher in second phase (3.9 - first phase vs 4.2 - second phase)
- Satisfaction with health educators' information and support: 4.25

# How many men privated?

165 privates over the 2 project phases

- 116 gave positive consent
  - 6 computer generated porn
  - 15 said 'no'
  - 28 left before permission was requested
- 
- Most men had multiple and complex reasons for contacting the health educators

# Reasons for privatizing



# What supports did the men receive?

Often combination of information, referral and support

- 86% information re; STI symptoms, risks & treatments
- 29% referred to a local health service
- 8 distressed men received support
- 179 accessed gonorrhoea fact sheet

Hunko 23yo: Has sex with men and women. His family or friends do not know about his encounters with men. He has no links with the gay community. Sexual activity with men includes oral sex only. He describes his sexual relationships with women as a way of maintaining masculinity and keeping up with his mates.

In response to our question 'how's it going?'

- *'fucking tough! But gotta keep up with my mates or they will get suss.'*

He also said

- *'yeah it's strange tho. Birds all my life and now attracted to blokes, yeah it hit me between the eyes.'*

Did he want support about coming out

- *'nah not ready and never will mate. Too hard.'*

Provided education/information about STIs, support services, supports

Randy 20yo first generation Australian Asian man:  
STI knowledge limited, has no contact with the gay  
community and is 'not out'.

- Has never had a HIV test and wants to get tested
- He talked about his unsafe and unprotected sexual activity
- *'Receptive, I like the feeling of closeness, that there is someone inside me. I use it as a substitute for a real relationship. I feel like a slut and I know people will condemn me.'*
- Talked about his sexual experiences, desires etc and provided information about safe sex, HIV testing, STIs, support.

Biceps: 18 yo. Lives at home. On parent's Medicare card. Only been to family GP for usual health concerns. Has protected anal sex.

- Concerned about painful lumps on his penis.
- *'Wondering if you can help me with these lumps. Sort of like blisters. They are really sore then go away. I've had them a couple of times.'*
- Provided information about herpes and other STIs, referral to sexual health service, information about oral sex and STIs, hepatitis A and B vaccination

# Demographic profiles of the men who privatized - age, location, birth country

- Average age, 32 yrs (range 18 - 58 yrs)
- 6 lived in Australia outside Victoria
- 3 overseas
- 107 Victorian men - 49 Melbourne suburbs & 8 rural localities
- Parents' birth country: 5 - Europe, 2 - Philippines, Indonesia, India, 1- Sth Africa, Japan, Vietnam.

# *Feedback on the service and health message*

- 22% - no changes
- 13% - pleased that the service was there. Would like it there more
- 9% - suggested advertising the service
- Suggestions re message content contradictory eg. 'be less formal' and 'be more formal to show you're legit' or 'shouldn't use shock tactics' and the 'more blunt the message the better'

# How has the project been successful?

1. Reached men in their own environments
2. Anonymous support, education and referral
3. ? Bridged the gap between men thinking that they wanted to see the doctor and doing it
4. Provided information about safe sex, STIs and HIV
5. Powerful model for sexual health intervention. First arm like a normal safe sex campaign. Second is immediate expert interpersonal back instantly in real time
6. Important for men who have not disclosed
7. Model is reflexive
8. Transportable to other internet chatrooms

# Service recommendations

1. Occurs as an ongoing component of HIV/STI service provision
2. Adequately staffed by professionals with experience and knowledge in sexual health, health promotion and education
3. Conducted on other sites which cater to the needs of men who have sex with men
4. Is responsive to current epidemiological data on the incidence and prevalence of HIV and STIs in Australia
5. Is available on a consistent, predictable basis
6. Evaluation and research remain integral

# Current work on Gay.com

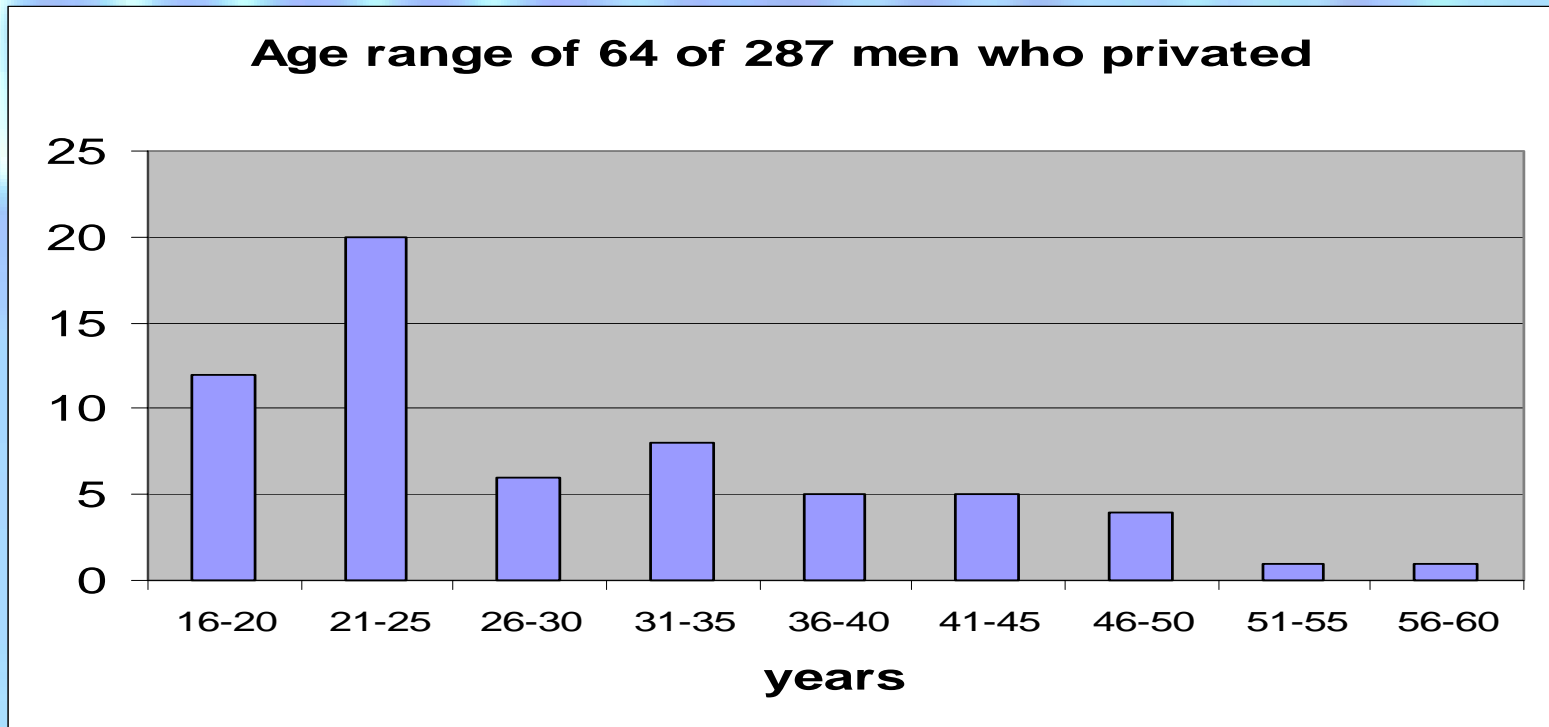
- Commenced September 2003
- Two, three hour sessions each week: Monday evening and another rotating afternoon
- Partially funded though small grant from DHS
- Continue to work in pairs: one sexual health nurse, one gay man with health and sector knowledge and experience
- Chat bio: 'Health Educators; online now to chat about sexual health' (Alfred logo and details in profile)

# Data from 45 sessions: September 03-April 04

Room	Men exposed to message	Message scrolls	Time (hours)	Privates
Inner	26,126	224	126	206
Mature	10,378	159	93.5	56
Asian	3,068	66	38.5	22
No room				3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>39,572</b>	<b>449</b>	<b>258</b>	<b>287</b>
Average per session	860	9.7	5.6	6.4

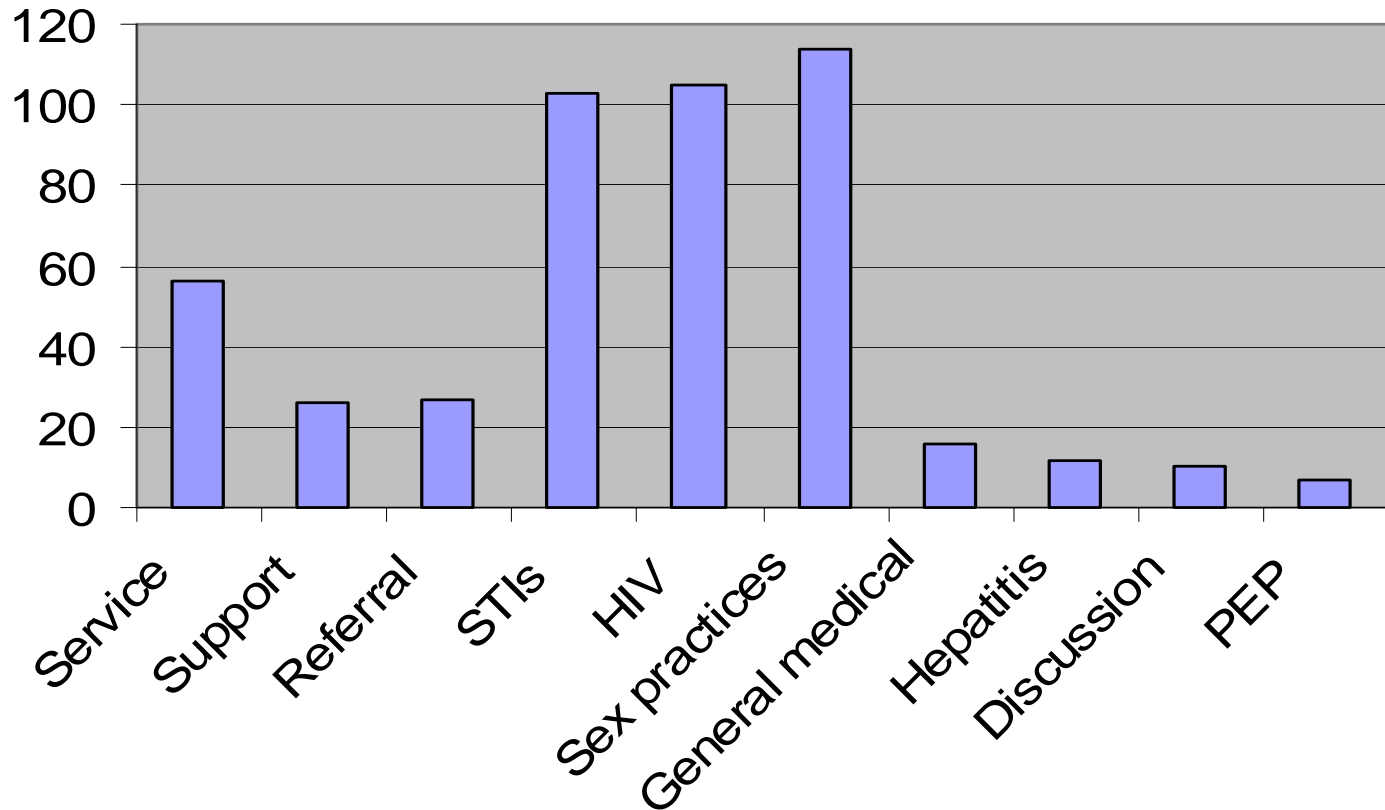
# Data from private chats

- 287 private chats in 45, 3 hour online sessions
- 25 men spoke to us twice, 4 spoke to us three times and 1 spoke to us seven times
- Average 6.4 'chats' per session



# Topic raised in private chats

Topics raised in private chats



# Future service direction

- Continue to work in the chatrooms
- Plan research with the aims of:
  1. Learning more about the men who private us (demographics, sexual practices, reasons for privating)
  2. Assessing whether this intervention results in:
    - Presentation for STI/HIV testing /screening
    - Change in high risk sexual practices
    - Increased knowledge re HIV/STIs

# Thanks

To the men

- for their welcome response in the main chatrooms
- who talked with us on Gay.com.
- who consented to participating in the research

To the reference group

- John Daye                      People Living With HIV/AIDS
- Michael Hurley                ARCSHS, LaTrobe University
- Guy Hussey                    VAC/GMHC
- Anne Mijch                    Victorian HIV Service, Infectious Diseases Unit, The Alfred
- Stephen Scott                 VAC/GMHC
- Ian Seal                         FPV

Report available: [www.accessinfo.org.au](http://www.accessinfo.org.au)