

Making Links Conference
Sydney 14th & 15th November 2005

NETREACH

Hello my name is Gary Spence and I am the Outreach worker at Gay Men's Health at the Aids Council of South Australia, I have been in this position for nearly 3 1/2 years. Today I'm going to be discussing and showcasing the Netreach Project. This will be an interactive session and I will be linked up to the Gay Men's Health Office in Adelaide and do a demonstration on how this project operates.

Netreach work includes any sessions that are conducted on the Internet, through chat rooms and online messaging.

Netreach is an information resource for clients and information should be given freely. It is important to make new contacts and, if required, channel clients into mainstream or other services appropriate to their needs.

Outreach in the 21st century is changing with the internet and gay chat rooms becoming increasingly more popular. Gay chat rooms on the internet represent an important expression of community networks and social and sexual interaction and are particularly important in this dispersed population.

South Australia is geographically large with a small and diverse population of gay and homosexuality active men. The Outreach project at Gay Men's Health, aims to connect with men to offer support, health promotion and sexual health advice.

This presentation will discuss emerging patterns of interaction between the Outreach worker and chat room users, I will provide discussion points on the practical and ethical questions arising for chat room Outreach and relate them to the experience of the more 'traditional' beat and venue outreach work. I will also discuss the challenges that the outreach worker faces when going into a chat

room eg typing skills, professional conduct, the role that the outreach worker has in the room and dealing with some of the diverse responses from chat room users.

Netreach is an initiative to look at providing health information and referral to gay and homosexually active men who use internet chat rooms. This involves Gay Men's Health Workers entering the *Gay.com* chat room indicating that they are from Gay Men's Health, and advising of their availability for one to one pvt (*private*) chat or consultation. The workers provide health or related messages, information of services available or of forthcoming events. When entering the chat room the following information may be posted into the main chat room area '*Pvt for Safe Sex Information and services available at Gay Men's Health*'. Workers practice under a set of Netreach Procedures.

The 2 most common gay internet chat sites that men who want to chat with other men use is *Gaydar* and *Gay.com*. At this stage Netreach is only conducted in *Gay.Com*, as GAYDAR have not yet given permission for Health related services to be permitted in chat rooms, but plans are underway that may allow for this to occur in the future.

In the South Australian section of *gay.com* chat there are 5 rooms available to chat in, Adelaide City-Wide, Mature, Bisexual, Asian and Mount Gambier. Netreach is not conducted in rooms where there are less than 4 - 5 people as this would seem intimidating for the users in the room.

Netreach sessions are conducted at a variety of 2 hour blocks throughout each day of the working week (Monday - Friday) between 7:30 am & 9:00 pm

From the Netreach trial that was conducted April - July 2004 the following was discovered:

The most common length of chat interaction was between 10 & 15 minutes.

The most common age group was 36 - 40 yr olds

And the most common topics discussed were:

STIs
GMH Activities
Condoms
Relationships
Service Feedback
Anal Sex
General Chat
HIV Transmission
HIV Testing
Oral Sex
Sexuality
Harassment/Violence
Penis Problems

The feedback from chat room users has been very positive, many users at the beginning of the project wanted to know why Gay Men's Health were in the chat room;" Were we there to 'hook' up or for some other purpose?" Once this was explained a few times to the 'regular' users it seemed that users were engaging in pvt conversation more often. The 'regular' users are those men who use the chat room on a regular basis, some having ADSL and being online continuously. They seem to take ownership of the room and monitor who is in the room, for how long and who they are friendly with.

Some of the comments received from individual chat room users:

"Appreciated the information"

'Excellent Service"

'Great Service"

'Very Grateful for the chat'

'Excellent idea, good for those too frightened to go to Gay Men's Health'

'Very appreciative of the information and think that it's good that GMH is providing this service'

'Very impressed that gay men's health are working from a chat room'

Not many chat room users indicated their HIV status:

In some cases it was difficult to obtain exactly where the chat room users live as some people are not forthcoming with this information.

Some of the issues when online chatting whilst working:

- Clients wanting to chat you up
- Sometimes you can have a little difficulty in answering questions when you have time to ponder over your answer, especially when your answer is put into writing and sent because it can't be retrieved.
- Emotions are hard to put into writing - use symbols eg 😊 ☹
- Typing skills are put to the test, a client doesn't want to be kept waiting too long for an answer.
- Talking to too many clients at once - 2 is plenty ask the 3rd or others if you can initiate pvt chat with them when you are free otherwise it can get very confusing also you may send your response to the wrong client.

Recommendations

Some of the recommendations that came out of the trial period were and have since been initiated are as follows:

- The 'Netreach' program to continue on a permanent basis.
- Netreach to be performed at least 3 times per week in 2 hour sessions
- Sessions to be conducted Monday - Friday
- At least 1 x 2 hour session 5pm - 8pm (for the people who use internet when getting home from work) - per week.

- Do not recommend that Netreach is performed after 8pm as it appears that men who use the internet after this time are usually looking to 'hook' up for sex and not interested in the service.
- If possible, netreach to be performed with 2 people (**but not essential**) 1 person being a GMH employee.
- Training to be developed for future netreach volunteers, this is in conjunction with the ACSA Information Services Officer.
- Netreach to be promoted through the various means available eg: GMH publications, GMH Web site, media, GMH groups and any other appropriate areas.

Procedures

Some of the Netreach Procedures are:

- Netreach workers should allow time before sessions to plan and prepare with co-workers. This will include updating staff/volunteers, checking details from previous sessions and preparing resources.
- Netreach workers where possible should work in pairs, and take turns at the keyboard during the session. This will ensure that they will have the opportunity to consult and offer each other professional advice before responding to clients online.
- Workers will always login using the '*Gay Men's Health*' profile.
- In the event of an emergency a contact number should be available for staff to use whilst on duty.
- A Netreach phone will be available to allow a client to contact by phone.
- Do not initiate private chat with someone online unless they request or initiate it, or have obtained their permission. This allows chatters and monitors to see that the Netreach project does not try to interfere or obstruct regular chat.
- When a client contacts you, explain who you are, and what the project has to offer. You should make them aware of the web address, email contact and details of services.

- You may ask the client for a name with which they wish to be identified. It does not have to be their real name or may be just a username if they always use it. Some of this information may be found on the user's profile. Before the conversation is terminated ask the client if they will give you their age and post code, add this information to the *client contact sheets*. - **Statistical purposes**
- Make notes of relevant comments that the client makes concerning the service and add these comments to the *Netreach Session Record Sheets*.
- Private conversations should not be recorded unless permission is sought from the person you are chatting with, advise them that any personal details will not be recorded and that this is only going to be printed for training & statistical purposes. - **Not really recommended**
- Workers should have a good knowledge of local agencies, and have available a relevant contact list, including opening times of services. Workers should be familiar with the Gay Men's Health website content, and know of relevant websites for referral.
- The nature of the work of Netreach relies heavily on gaining the trust of clients. To ensure this trust is not misplaced, workers need to promote the confidentiality of the service, refer to the '*Confidentiality Policy*'.

DEMONSTRATE THE NETREACH PROJECT

Summary

The last few years has seen the emergence of the internet as a place where people can encounter others and they can subsequently meet and have sex. Use of the internet among gay men and other homosexually active men has increased dramatically in recent years, as it has with other populations. With this world-wide phenomenon it is important for health organisations such as Gay Men's Health to explore ways of reaching the men who use the internet to meet up with other men so that they are fully informed of sexual health issues and of services available to them.

Many men who use the internet may not identify as being gay, but do engage in sex with other men. These same men may never have heard of Gay Men's Health (GMH), as has been the case with a few men who have engaged in pvt chat during the trial period. The program started off slow, with the conversations being minimal, and from men who were just curious and maybe a bit suspicious as to why GMH were in the chat room. Later there were lengthy conversations regarding sexual health and services available at GMH. Comments from chat room users have been very positive and supportive. Many conversations near the end of the trial period were from men who have been regular users in the room since the beginning of the trial. Seeing GMH in the room on a regular basis may have given them the confidence to initiate pvt chat and ask questions.

Thankyou !