

Project Sigma : socio-sexual investigations of gay men and AIDS : aims and methods : a thre year study of male gay and bisexual lifestyles.

Contributors

Project Sigma (University College, Cardiff)

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PROJECT



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**SOCIO-SEXUAL
INVESTIGATIONS OF
GAY
MEN AND
AIDS**

AIMS AND METHODS

a
three year study
of male
gay and bisexual
lifestyles

PROJECT SIGMA is

- The largest study of gay and bisexual men ever undertaken in this country
- The only national study of HIV infection among the non clinic population in the UK
- The only national study of its type which has evolved from within the gay community and which is gay managed
- The only study of its kind specifically to include the more covert gay and bisexual man
- The only prospective study of its kind in the UK

Project SIGMA, running since 1983, has already achieved some notable results:

- It has accumulated a large and unique database of the sexual activity of gay and bisexual men from its innovative use of diary keeping.
- It includes the first study of **changing** sexual behaviour amongst the non-clinic population from its postal questionnaires.

The Project has now received funding from the Medical Research Council and from the DHSS. This enables us to expand on these past achievements.

AIMS

- To investigate the inter-relationship between types and patterns of sexual behaviour and the presence of HIV antibodies
- To examine sexual behaviour in relation to the progression to AIDS in those who are HIV antibody positive
- To monitor changes in sexual behaviour and HIV antibody status
- To examine the uptake and reactions of gay and bisexual men to 'safer sex' practices (for example, the use of condoms)

In addition there is a number of subsidiary projects parallel in execution and complementary in scope.

SAMPLE

The HI Virus is no respecter of sexual identity. If we are to achieve our aims then we must recognize the diversity of homosexual behaviours. We intend therefore to include in the sample those who may not identify themselves as gay or bisexual but who engage in a significant amount of homosexual sex.

The main centres of the project are London and South Wales in which a controlled cohort of some 750 men is being studied over the next three years. Further parallel samples are also being taken in other urban areas, with particular emphasis on Newcastle upon Tyne, in an effort to assess regional variations in lifestyles. Full national coverage is given by the diaries and the postal survey, involving many hundreds of men.

METHODS

The project incorporates several complementary means of gathering information.

- The sexual diaries are a daily record of sexual activity kept by respondents for one month and repeated at periodic intervals. Two such waves have already been collected and provide a unique source of data on homosexual behaviour in the UK.
- The detailed interview focuses on the relationship between lifestyles and HIV infection. Each respondent is asked for detailed and extensive information on sexual practices, numbers of sexual partners, health, self image and attitudes to illness. During the present study the interview will be repeated twice.
- Blood samples are collected to establish the incidence and spread of HIV infection.
- The postal survey of sexual behaviour, is a self response questionnaire, which appears from time to time in the gay press.

We believe that the results will enhance our understanding of the way the HI Virus spreads and why some, and not others, go on to develop AIDS. The gay community, health education authorities, the medical and nursing professions and epidemiologists should all benefit from this study.

It is hoped that Project SIGMA, the largest study of gay and bisexual lifestyles in this country, will help to demystify and break down the prejudice against the gay community.

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