

A European seminar in Paris on gay health

East/West: exchanging good practices!

At the end of June, around 50 delegates originating from 21 European countries participated in the first pan-European seminar on gay health* organized by AIDES, AIDS ACTION EUROPE and PSI-Russia. Today, thanks to the European Union, we can exchange know-how from all sides in terms of HIV prevention among gay men.

A pride parade demonstration for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgenders (LGBT) that takes place without extremists and without violent confrontations, that's a change. That's a change from what still happens in Bucharest, in Krakow, Riga and Moscow... But that is what several participants in the first pan-European seminar on gay health had the pleasure to experience in Paris when they walked the Parisian pavement at the end of June, on the occasion of the Paris LGBT pride march. It was one way to recall that the sexual health of men who have sex with men also depends on the recognition of the rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders. This unprecedented meeting, above all, allowed an exchange on the different modes of intervention to improve HIV prevention and support with gay men and an agreement on the need to act on an international scale toward improving the sexual health of gays.

HIV: a major risk among gays in Europe

In Western Europe, the number of new HIV cases diagnosed among gay men has been increasing over the past 5 years and studies targeting homosexuals reveal very high rates of HIV prevalence (percentage of the population living with the virus; including 12% in Germany, 13% in France, 18% in Spain...). The prevalence estimated among gays in Central and Eastern Europe appears much lower, but we deplore serious remaining gaps in access to testing. Gay men often refuse to reveal their sexual practices when they take an HIV test because of the fear of discrimination. In Central and Eastern Europe, gay men are tested much later than in Western Europe, which can lead to severe consequences from a medical point of view.

The essential role of local associations

A shared objective is to inform gays who are exposed to the risk of HIV contamination wherever they can be found. And nowadays, a lot of people frequent Internet forums where men can meet other men. Thus, the site www.gaycruise.nl, created by the city of Rotterdam and the association Schorer, proposes training on sexual health tailored to each Internet user. An evaluation of this service has demonstrated an improvement in the prevention practices among the site's users. From Ljubljana, Slovenia, volunteers of the association ŠKUC-MAGNUS also intervene on gay forums, by responding, via their online identity, to all questions related to HIV and sexual health. Beyond this, gays living with HIV play a major role in local NGOs, by organizing for example, like at SIEĆ PLUS in Poland, support groups for gays who have just learned their positive HIV status. On its side, the

Ukrainian network of people living with HIV has just started a pilot project to improve the quality of life of gays affected by HIV, including, for instance, awareness raising campaigns or the organization of regional self-support groups (a project partly financed by Sir Elton John!).

Sandra Essid and
Arnaud Wasson-Simon

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“We’re the biggest minority in the country.”

Political scientist Michal Minalto, head of the advocacy unit in the Social AIDS committee (SKA), is an activist in the fight against AIDS and for the rights of gays, notably for the Polish network of people living with HIV “SIEĆ PLUS”.

Is Polish society particularly homophobic?

I don’t think that it’s the society that is homophobic, just the contrary. It’s a minority of populist male politicians, unfortunately in power, who impose a discourse of violence and hate.

Do we have an idea of the number of gays in Poland and those who are HIV positive ?

We could say that for a population of 38 million inhabitants, there must be two and a half million gays and lesbians. That makes us the biggest minority in the country! Regarding HIV, Poland is a country with a low prevalence, with nearly 11,000 diagnoses since 1985. About 15% of



those are infections among MSM. What is the most worrying, without a doubt, is that the epidemic is more significant considering the number of diagnoses that take place very late, when the disease has already progressed to AIDS. In addition, Poland is a country that enormously lacks prevention and sexual education.

Which actions presented during the gay health seminar do you think are transferable to the situation of Polish gays?

Since the Internet is very developed in Poland, it was the online services presented by our Dutch and Slovenian colleagues that struck me the most. Furthermore, it’s in the virtual world that we can do prevention actions with a limited budget such as ours.

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Interview by Jean-François Laforgerie

“The problem is the taboo.”

Coordinator of gay actions with the Ukrainian network of people living with HIV (All Ukrainian Network of People Living with HIV – www.network.org.ua), Petro Polyantsev is a young activist who created in 2007 a project to better the lives of those with HIV (www.gayplus.info).

Do you have reliable numbers on HIV contaminations among gays in Ukraine?

The national agency to fight AIDS recently organized an anonymous survey that revealed that 30% of the People living with HIV questioned were men having sexual relations with other men, in which 9.2% said they were gay.

Do the public powers demonstrate a political will in favor of your activities?

The problem is the taboo. We are witnessing a multiplication of anti-gay declarations, notably from the Christian church and the communist party. Our activities are not recognized and are not publicly financed.



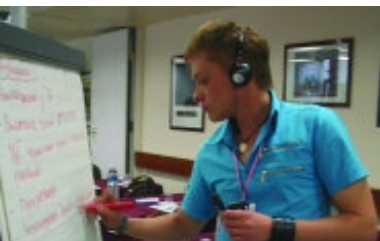
Which points would you like to improve in your activities?

Most HIV positive gay men hide their status and don’t contact the association. They often don’t come until they’ve reached an advanced stage of the illness, when they need taxing and expensive treatments against opportunistic infections. We must be able to enlarge the range of our services. We have an equal need to go further in the promotion of tolerance toward People Living with HIV in the gay community.

What have you learned in this seminar that you would like to apply?

The idea of using the Internet really interested me, especially to make contacts with young people.

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Interviewed by Sandra Essid



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Remaides is a leading French language publication on HIV including updates on medical issues with a strong focus on the perspectives of People Living with HIV. Four times per year, Remaides is distributed in 45000 copies primarily in France as well as to subscribers in 70 countries worldwide.

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