

## Issue 159 – February 2021

### Male sex worker sexual health

A study (E. Turek, et. al., “HIV, Sexually Transmitted Infections and Sexual Practices Among Male Sex Workers Attending a Sexual Health Clinic in Melbourne, Australia: 2010 to 2018”, *Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, Vol. 48, No. 2, Feb. 2021) of 190 male sex workers who attended the Melbourne Sexual Health Centre between 2010 and 2018 has revealed what the authors described as “suboptimal” condom use with clients (p. 106). The median age of the workers was 28 years and 52.8% were born in Australia.

The male sex workers mostly had sex with other men, although 32 reported that they had sex only with women. Although sex workers in Victoria are legally required to use condoms with clients, 30.4% of the male sex workers reported they had condomless anal sex with a client since their last screening and 59.6% had condomless oral sex with a client. Rates of condomless anal sex with non-commercial sexual partners were considerably higher. According to the authors of the study, the reported rates of condomless sex by male sex workers with their clients was “much higher” than that reported by female sex workers (p. 106).

Of the 190 male sex workers that were the subject of the study, one had a previous HIV diagnosis and the positivity of newly diagnosed HIV was

1.7%, infectious syphilis was 6.1%, chlamydia was 9.6%, and gonorrhoea was either 8.6% (January 2010 to February 2015) or 10.8% (March 2015 to December 2018). Although cautioning against making comparisons with other men who have sex with men, because male sex workers have a higher number of sexual partners, the authors of the study note that, “the HIV/STI positivity is comparable to MSM [men who have sex with men] who are not sex workers” (p. 106).

The male sex workers who had sex with other men were at “much higher STI risk” than their counterparts who had sex only with women (p. 106). For the 32 workers who said they had sex only with women, “the positivity of HIV/STI was 0%” (p. 106).

The study highlights the importance of safer sex promotion and practices in reducing the incidence of STIs (including HIV).

STIs can be passed on during unprotected vaginal, anal or oral sex with an infected person. Often people with STIs will have no symptoms so they may have an STI without knowing it and look perfectly healthy to their sexual partners. If there are symptoms, they may include:

- unusual discharge from the genitals
- difficulty or pain when urinating or having sex
- blisters, warts, lumps, bumps or sores on the genitals
- rash, cracked, itchy or irritated skin on or around the genital region.

Safer sex means not putting you or your sexual partners at risk of STIs. Always use prophylactics (condoms and dental dams) for vaginal, anal or oral sex, along with water-based lubricant. This is the best way to protect yourself and others from STIs.

Undetected and untreated STIs can have serious long-term health complications, highlighting the importance of regular sexual health checks for people who have sex with multiple casual partners. The more people you have sex with, the greater the chance of being exposed to an STI.

**In Queensland, all sex workers and their clients must use prophylactics. Under s. 77A of the *Prostitution Act 1999* it is unlawful to provide, offer to provide, ask for, accept an offer of, or to obtain prostitution involving sexual intercourse or oral sex without the use of a prophylactic.** Also, a client obtaining prostitution involving sexual intercourse or oral sex must not:

- interfere with (including misuse or damage) the efficacy of a prophylactic
- use, or continue to use, a prophylactic that the person knows, or could reasonably be expected to know is damaged.

These are serious offences carrying a maximum penalty of 100 penalty units (which is currently \$13,345).

## Criminalisation of the purchase of sex

Since Sweden criminalised the purchase but not the sale of sexual services in 1999 in an effort to end demand for prostitution and effectively abolish the industry in the longer term, some other countries have followed its lead, including Norway, Iceland, Canada, Northern Ireland, France, Ireland and Israel.

The effectiveness of such laws is questionable. In an 18 September 2020 submission to the Department of Justice and Equality of the Republic of Ireland review of the 2017 criminalisation of the purchase of sexual services, Amnesty International stated:

While the law may be intended to shift police focus, and therefore blame, from the sex worker to the client, in practice Amnesty International has found from research in other countries that such laws can lead to sex workers having to take risks to protect their clients from detection by law enforcement, such as visiting locations determined only by their clients ...

Furthermore, international evidence increasingly demonstrates that criminalisation of the purchase of sexual services puts sex workers at greater harm of human rights violations and abuses, including at the hands of clients ...

There have been some reports of increased violence against sex workers in Ireland ...

Also, criminalising the purchase of sex can actually increase the stigma and marginalisation experienced by sex workers and at the same time not achieve the stated aim of reducing demand for sexual services. In Northern Ireland, for instance, a sex buyer criminalisation law was enacted in 2015 with the intention to reduce demand for sexual services. In 2019, upon the review it commissioned of this law, the

Department of Justice “concluded that there is no evidence that the offence of purchasing sexual services has produced a downward pressure on the demand for, or supply of, sexual services”. On the other hand, the review indicated that there had been an increase in instances of anti-social and abusive behaviours against sex workers since 2016. (pp. 4 - 6)

In making a submission to the Department of Justice and Equality of the Republic of Ireland review, a group of 80 academics said that harm minimisation should be at the core of any legal framework for the sex industry. They stated:

While we understand the intention of criminalising of the buyer was to signal the wrongfulness of sexual violence and exploitation of sex workers, we do not agree that it is actually making sex workers lives better. Rather we submit that it is actively creating a climate of risk and danger that harms sex workers' safety ...

Because a purchaser risks conviction under the 2017 Act, the purchaser may push the seller to engage in more risky behaviour. There is more at stake for the purchaser in engaging in this conduct ...

We are convinced, from listening to and reading sex workers' accounts of their experiences, that the 2017 Act and how it is policed have not lead to greater protection of sex workers or greater equality of women and girls. Instead they have increased the threats faced by sex workers and increases their marginalisation. Criminalisation neither reduces the occurrence of sex work nor the danger that those involved in it face. Nor has it reduced the incidence of sexual violence in society. (pp. 1, 3 and 5)

In 2014, the purchase but not the sale of sexual services was criminalised in Canada. According to a recent study (A. Crago, et. al., “Sex Workers’

Access to Police Assistance in Safety Emergencies and Means of Escape from Situations of Violence and Confinement under an ‘End Demand’ Criminalization Model: A Five City Study in Canada”, *Social Sciences*, 10, 13, Jan 2021) of 200 sex workers (drawn heavily from the most vulnerable workers) in that country:

One might have expected that sex workers would report high levels of being able to call 911 [the police emergency number in Canada] for help given that the activities directly linked to selling sex are no longer criminalized except in very narrow circumstances. Furthermore, the new legislation’s specifically articulated goal is to protect “vulnerable” and “exploited” persons. However, this is not borne out by our data ... (p. 7)

## 2021 PLA meeting dates

The PLA generally meets on the third Monday of each month. Meeting dates for the remainder of 2021 are: 15 March, 19 April, 17 May, 21 June, 19 July, 16 August, 20 September, 18 October, 15 November, and 13 December. *Whilst current at the time of printing, these dates are tentative and subject to change without notice.*

## Vacancies for approved manager positions

**Cleo’s on Nile:** Full-time/part-time position is now available. We are looking for a presentable, well spoken, honest and reliable manager to join our amazing team. We can offer flexibility with days and hours. For more information please contact Trish for a friendly chat on 0481063091 or email [managercleosonnile@gmail.com](mailto:managercleosonnile@gmail.com).

**Please note that approved manager advertisements may be submitted at any time for inclusion in the next**

available edition of the newsletter. They should be emailed to [plaadmin@iprimus.com.au](mailto:plaadmin@iprimus.com.au).

• Level 20, 50 Ann St, Brisbane • GPO Box 3196, Brisbane, Qld, 4001 • Ph: 07 3858 9500 • E: [plaadmin@iprimus.com.au](mailto:plaadmin@iprimus.com.au) • W: [www.pla.qld.gov.au](http://www.pla.qld.gov.au)

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