BACKGROUND

The internet offers a unique opportunity to reach persons at risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STD), including those who may not otherwise seek sexual health information or services. A rapidly growing inventory of internet-based sexual health interventions includes STD/HIV testing, partner notification, educational websites, and outreach in the form of one-on-one messaging (“private chat”), broadcast messaging, and facilitated discussion on existing sexual/social networking, dating, and “cruising” websites. 1

As part of its STD and HIV nursing outreach program, the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) has delivered comprehensive sexual health information to various online communities since 2004. This cyber-outreach service reaches thousands of clients per year through peer-to-peer websites targeting sex workers and their patrons, gay men and other men who have sex with men, and youth. 2

The BCCDC is currently expanding its internet-based sexual health services by integrating outreach nursing with a new sexual health website, as well as offering online access to STD and HIV testing. 3 Understanding the needs of clients of existing online services will inform this service expansion.

OBJECTIVE

To evaluate satisfaction, knowledge and behavior change, and sexual health-related needs of clients of BCCDC cyber-outreach services, through an anonymous web-based survey on one local website used by sex workers and patrons.

METHODS

• Recruitment: Survey participants were recruited through periodic invitations posted by an outreach nurse to a bulletin board on the site. Respondents were re-directed to a separate site where they completed a brief, anonymous survey.

• Instrument: Questions elicited both closed-ended/quantitative outcomes as well as open-ended/qualitative feedback about the service.

REFERENCES

3. Travis Salway Hottes, Derek Kline, Elaine Jones, Glenn Doupe, Mark Gilbert. Clinical Prevention Services, British Columbia Centre for Disease Control, Vancouver, Canada

RESULTS

In 2011, nurses reached 270 clients through private messaging and countless more through the health information forum on the website. A total of 99 valid surveys were received during April-July 2011.

Variable (number of valid responses) %
Place of residence (n=71) British Columbia 83
Eskimos in Canada 18
Age, years (n=83) 19-24 7
25-34 23
35-44 23
45-54 29
55-64 12
66 6
Self-described gender (n=83) Female 18
Male 62
Sex male and female 50
Male and transgender or transsexual 3
Female and transgender or transsexual 6
Paternity of sex worker* (n=70) 70
Sex worker† (n=78) 17

Note: *Excluding non-interpretable entries. †Patron/sex worker defined as having given/received money, drugs, goods, or services in exchange for sex in previous six months; 36% (45/130) of patrons were male, and 52% (127/232) of sex workers were female.

Use of cyber-outreach services: 94% visited the health information forum on the site (92% ≥ twice)
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92% posted a question or common on the forum (36% ≥ twice)

Satisfaction with cyber-outreach services: 98% said the service was somewhat or very important 98% said the service was somewhat or very useful 98% said the service was somewhat or very useful

Satisfaction and appeal of internet-based testing in this population

CONCLUSIONS

• Sex workers and their patrons accessing sexual health information through an online cyber-outreach service in British Columbia have a high level of appreciation for the service.

• Anonymity is one of the most frequently cited benefits of the service and distinguishes online sexual health care from many comparable in-person services.

• Clients rely heavily upon the cyber-outreach nurses for trustworthy, up-to-date sexual health information, which they may not otherwise receive.

• Though resource-intensive, one-on-one sexual health outreach builds trust and engagement within online communities, especially those which experience stigma related to sexual behavior or STD/HIV and may therefore be reluctant to seek face-to-face services.

• Expansion and integration of internet-based sexual health services, including online access to nurses and STD/HIV testing, can facilitate improvements in sexual health knowledge and testing in these communities.