

HEALTH IN MEN

Number 1: October 2001 NEWSLETTER

Welcome to HIM!

Thank you for taking part in this study. I hope that your first interview was enjoyable, and that your blood test was comfortable.

Now that you have joined our project, perhaps you want to know more about how research like this helps our community, and the role the HIM project will play in the next few years.

The HIM project is part of the international HIV vaccines initiative, funded by the NSW and Commonwealth Health Departments, as well as the National Institutes of Health in the United States. A vaccine is in the process of being developed by a consortium of HIV researchers and drug manufacturers.

The HIM study is intended to keep track of how a possible vaccine might affect gay men's attitudes, beliefs and behaviour over time, and to determine whether it will be feasible to trial a vaccine in Sydney. But it will also do a number of other things as well.

Some years ago we had another study in Sydney, called Sydney Men and Sexual Health (SMASH) – many of those participating in HIM were also participants in SMASH. This study was similar to HIM in that gay men were interviewed once a year, mainly about safe sex and HIV. The findings from SMASH were crucial to the

development of many safe sex education campaigns throughout Australia (and, indeed, the world).

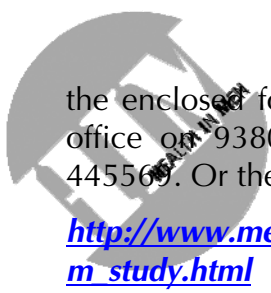
The difference between HIM and SMASH is that in the HIM project we have included questions about a range of other issues of concern to gay men, including broader health issues, and we are testing participants for sexually transmitted infections as well as HIV. This means that the HIM project has the potential to help shed light on a range of issues and assist the community in responding appropriately to them.

Having now completed your first interview and blood test for the study, you are probably wondering what else will be involved. Very simply, each year for the next five years, we will be in touch with you to arrange a follow-up interview and blood test. Of course, you are under no obligation to do any more interviews but, naturally, the study will be most effective if everyone could complete the study entirely.

This year we need to interview 500 gay men in Sydney. Each year thereafter we need to reinterview those same men and enrol an additional 500 men, so that by the end of the study we should have about 2000 gay men enrolled in the study. This will make it the largest study of its type in Australia.

We do, however, need your help to make this happen. If you know any other HIV-negative gay men, please encourage them to participate in the HIM study. They can either complete





the enclosed form or they can call our office on 9380-5858 or freecall 1800 445569. Or they can visit our website:

http://www.med.unsw.edu.au/nchechr/him_study.html

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How can the HIM Study contribute?

Until about three years ago our community relied on the SMASH study to inform our response to the HIV epidemic. The study contributed enormously to our community's response to HIV, largely due to the dedication and support of the study participants.

Now we are on the verge of a new era. Treatments have improved but HIV still remains a risk. International attention is turning to vaccines and how the epidemic is shifting. With this in mind we have been funded to interview HIV-negative gay men.

However, you might sometimes wonder: "What happens with all this information these people are getting from my participation in this study?"

One of the organisations behind HIM is the AIDS Council of NSW (ACON) and they are also one of the agencies that will use the information that you

provide to better serve the gay community.

ACON uses the information in many different ways. From making decisions about what projects and services need more funding, to the development of campaigns and assisting ACON with its long term strategies to support, educate and advocate on behalf of gay men and the gay community.

An example of how information from research like this has been used by ACON in the past is in the development of the Gay Men's Education Strategy. This document had many references to the complex issues that gay men face in making decisions about their health. What participants told SMASH and was recorded on the questionnaires was then interpreted by staff at the National HIV Centres. It then allowed ACON to make strategic decisions on how to focus prevention and education efforts in the future.

One of the issues raised by the SMASH research was how gay men negotiate condom use in their relationships with their partners. It was through this research that the concept of 'negotiated safety' was born (ie. that a number of gay men in relationships were explicitly negotiating not using condoms with their regular partners of the same HIV status). ACON was then in the position to design the Talk...Test... Test... Trust campaign, assisting gay men to establish a framework in which to safely negotiate not using condoms in their relationship. Later, the information from the research that 50% of new HIV infections occur within newly formed relationships, led ACON to reinvigorate that campaign to address that particular issue. This is only one example of how what you say gets translated into activity that benefits the community.



You have probably seen ACON around in its many forms – from pamphlets and posters, to the Safe Sex Sluts who hand out safe packs at Mardi Gras. These activities, and the people that design them, rely upon the data from studies like HIM to keep up-to-date on what gay men are saying and doing. It is one thing for the education and support staff at ACON to read the latest research from projects in the US or examine campaigns from the UK, but gay men in Sydney are as unique as any population of gay men around the world.

Through the peer education and support workshops as well as the outreach activities of volunteers and staff at ACON, we are able to listen to the concerns and issues of plenty of gay men. However, it would take **years** for us to hear from the hundreds of men who will participate in HIM & provide information about a huge range of issues. Only through studies such as HIM can we learn more about our communities and provide the best possible services and programs. All this work is largely due to you, for without your participation many campaigns could never be produced. It may even be possible that without the participation of people like you in such research we could have more HIV infections than we currently do.

In addition to all this, the HIM study will play an active role in the investigation into the development of an HIV vaccine. Without your assistance, through HIM, we would have far less information about the possible impact of such a vaccine, and about the feasibility of trialling a vaccine here in Sydney.

Background & Purpose

It has been twenty years since the beginning of the HIV-epidemic. In that time much has changed and now we need to carefully monitor how changes in the epidemic can affect gay men's behaviour and attitudes. The Health in Men (HIM) study will help us do this.

Recent changes in treatments, and research into the possibility of a future vaccine, have raised new issues. To address these we began the Health in Men Study.

We need to recruit 500 HIV-negative gay men into the study per year, making it the largest ever study of its type in Australia.

One of the senior investigators on the study is Dr Andrew Grulich of the National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research: "We want to recruit a wide range of gay men into the study. This will help ensure the study accurately reflects the thinking and behaviour of gay men in Sydney."

The HIM study will investigate gay men's expectations and understandings of HIV vaccines, as well as HIV treatments. It will also look at sexual behaviour, risk assessment and management, and participation in the gay community. In doing so, the study will provide valuable information for HIV education and for any future trials of a HIV vaccine.

Another Senior Investigator with HIM is Dr Paul Van de Ven of the National Centre in HIV Social Research: "The HIM study will play a crucial role in guiding the development of HIV education and public health policy for gay men in Australia."

How can you help?

Your participation has already helped: Research helps our community respond to issues raised by HIV and AIDS.

However, you can help us further. Firstly, this study depends on interviewing people each year so we can see what has changed and measure rates of HIV infection. Your willingness to come back again next year is crucial to the study's success. And this applies regardless of who you are or what your situation is. Indeed, even if absolutely nothing has changed for you next year when it is time to do your next interview, that is just as important as those people who have had a dramatic change in circumstances. We need both types of people if we are to accurately measure what is happening in our community and rates of HIV infection. Without this we cannot know how feasible it will be to conduct the HIV vaccine trial in Sydney.

believe HIV remains an important issue for our community or they are 'over it', or whether or not they think a vaccine is important for gay men in Australia, their participation is important.

If you have friends that would be willing to participate, please encourage them. They can either complete the enclosed form or they can call our office on 9380-5858 or freecall 1800 445569. Or they can visit our website:

http://www.med.unsw.edu.au/nchecr/him_study.html

Also, if you are in a gay organisation or helping organise a social function for gay men, we would be very happy to send someone along or provide additional pamphlets to explain the study to those that might be able to assist.

HIM is a joint project of the National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research, the National Centre in HIV Social Research, the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations, and the AIDS Council of NSW.

participate in the study. Eventually, we will need about 2000 HIV-negative gay men in Sydney for the study, and this year we need to recruit about 500. We have already recruited several hundred, but we need many more. Whether they are sexually active or not, whether they

