

AWARENESS OF AIDS AMONG TRANSSEXUAL PROSTITUTES IN SINGAPORE

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SYNOPSIS

A prospective study of 100 Transsexual Prostitutes attending Middle Road Hospital with respect to awareness of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) among them was undertaken. 67.3% of Chinese and 48.7% of Malay Transsexuals were aware of AIDS. Of those that were aware, 46% had adopted extra precautionary measures. The measures adopted were evaluated.

INTRODUCTION

The Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is a recently recognised immunological disorder with a depressed cellular immunity manifesting as opportunistic infections and or unusual tumours. (1) Homosexual men, haemophiliacs, intravenous drug abusers and recipients of blood products are in the high risk groups. (2) The fact that homosexuals account for 75% of AIDS cases suggests that the nature of homosexual contact and their promiscuity provide an efficient means of transmission of the infectious agent. (3) In Singapore there exists a group of Transsexuals who are genotypically and phenotypically male with a persistent desire to be female. A high proportion of them are prostitutes who engage in exclusively anal receptive intercourse and oral sex, a social habit with a high risk for contracting AIDS. It is of great public health importance for risk groups to be aware and well informed about AIDS so that they can practise "safe" sex. This study evaluates the extent to which knowledge of AIDS exist among Singapore Transsexual prostitutes and the precautions adopted by them to limit their exposure to the AIDS associated virus (HTLV III/LAV).

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METHODS

100 Transsexual prostitutes on the register at Middle Road were randomly selected for the study. They were interviewed by the author between August 1984 — February 1985. Their age, race and educational levels were recorded. They were asked if they had been conscripted from National Service and what effect this had on them. They were asked if they had heard of AIDS and if so, how this had altered their sexual practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Transsexuals are defined using the criteria of Lukianowicz (1959): males with a persistent desire to be female by physical appearance (attire) and social acceptance and a high percentage wishing to undergo a "conversion operation". The cohort studied were all genetically male as confirmed by a buccal smear. They all practised receptive anal — oral sexual intercourse, and in all cases were the passive partner. The ethnic distribution and mean age is given in Table 1. It appears the proportion of Malays (36%) exceeds that in the normal population (14.5%). The reason for this is unclear. The educational level of the subjects is given in Table 2. 56% had primary school education or no education. This contrasts the findings of Tsoi (4) who reported 83% of his 56 subjects received secondary or tertiary education. The difference could be due to differences in the populations studied ie Tsoi included non-prostitutes as well as prostitutes. Many were either disrupted or not called up for National Service. Of those who were, 2 Chinese and 1 Malay developed an increased attachment to males as a direct consequence of enlistment. The numbers are too small to form any statistically valid conclusions regarding the effect of National Service on Transsexuals.

TABLE 1
ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION AND MEAN AGE IN
100 TRANSSEXUALS

Ethnicity	No.	Age in years	
		Mean	Range
Chinese	55	30.9	20 — 49
Malay	36	33.1	19 — 55
Indian	9	27.0	23 — 32

TABLE 2
EDUCATIONAL LEVELS OF TRANSSEXUALS

Educational Levels	Ethnicity		
	Chinese	Malay	Indian
Uneducated or Primary	46%	64%	77%
Secondary	50%	30%	23%
Post Secondary	4%	6%	0%

To the question "Have you heard of AIDS?" 67% of Chinese responders replied affirmatively as shown in Table 3a. 48% of Malay patients indicated they had heard of AIDS. This contrasts to the findings of a preliminary survey in the general population in Singapore in which 79% have heard of AIDS. Whilst the general public find the news media particularly newspapers as the principal source of information, the

TABLE 3a
PERCENTAGE OF TRANSSEXUAL RESPONDANTS
AWARE OF ACQUIRED IMMUNO DEFICIENCY
SYNDROME (AIDS)

Question	Ethnicity			
	Chinese	Malay	Indian	
Heard of AIDS:-	Yes	67%	48%	44%
	No	33%	52%	56%

Transsexuals rely more on each other for information. A gallop poll conducted in the United States in June 1985 indicated at least 96% of a broad cross section of Americans are aware of AIDS (6). Most studies have shown that knowledge of AIDS correlates significantly with educational levels and this may be one reason why Transsexuals are not as well informed as the general public. If public health measures are to succeed than more effort should be directed to educate them. Of those who answered in the affirmative to the above question, the following question was posed "Has knowledge of AIDS altered your sexual practice". As shown in Table 3b, 48% of

TABLE 3b
PERCENTAGE OF TRANSSEXUAL RESPONDANTS
WHO HAVE ALTERED SEXUAL PRACTICES AS A
DIRECT RESULT OF AIDS

Question	Ethnicity			
	Chinese	Malay	Indian	
Has AIDS altered sexual practices:-	Yes	67%	48%	44%
	No	33%	52%	56%

Chinese, 42% Malays indicated they had altered their sexual practices as a direct consequence of the fear of contracting AIDS. This, if consistently practised would represent a substantial behavioural modification and indicates that our Transsexuals are heeding the advice of their friends to practise "safe sex". A similar study conducted in San Francisco in April 1985 indicated a change of sexual practices among gay men (7). This provides support for continued efforts to promote changes in sexual practice that may reduce transmission. Table 4 lists the specific methods

TABLE 4
METHODS ADOPTED TO DECREASE AIDS
RISK AMONG TRANSSEXUALS

Method	Percentage Using
Use of Condoms	53%
Coming to MRH	26%
Avoidance of Caucasians	19%
Checking of genitalia	7%
Non-penetration	3%
Cleaning after act	3%
Avoidance of oralsex	3%

employed to avoid the risk of contracting AIDS as practised by the Transsexuals. A small proportion indicated they adopted more than one measure. It is interesting to note that 14 out of 26 (53%) relied on the Condom and insisted their clients use it. The use of the Condom, and non-exchange of semen during oral sex are at present defined as "safe" sex by the San Francisco AIDS foundation (6). It appears from this study more Transsexuals should be urged to insist on Condom use among their clients. 7 out of 14 felt that their risk of contracting AIDS is negligible as they were coming to Middle Road Hospital for routine checks. This belief stems from the false notion that AIDS is similar in nature to Gonorrhoea and Syphilis and can be cured with antibiotics. Beliefs existed in a small proportion (3%) that non-penetration, cleaning and checking of clients genitalia will help in reducing risk of AIDS. A fatalistic attitude was adopted among 6 subjects. They took the view that since death was inevitable they were prepared to get AIDS and were not prepared to adopt any precautionary measures. This group would be the most difficult group to reach for counselling. Until a cure is in sight public health information programmes remain the main method of controlling the spread of AIDS (8).

42% of the Transsexuals had undergone or wished to undergo sexual reassignment surgery. There was no significant difference between the proportion of Malay

or Chinese requestors. This contrasts the findings of Long (5) who studied 23 sexual reassignment requestors in Singapore and found none of Malay ethnic origin.

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