

# **Syphilis Awareness Campaign in MSM 2009**

## **Introduction**

Red Ribbon Centre launched the Syphilis Awareness Campaign (Campaign) for men who have sex with men (MSM) in 2009, with the support of the Social Hygiene Service (SHS), to increase awareness of sexual health in the MSM community, in particular the prevention and treatment of syphilis. This is the third of similar campaigns that have been initiated by RRC since 2006. Syphilis is a treatable clinical condition and its effective treatment will significantly reduce the risks of MSM acquiring other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. Through the Campaign, it was hoped that MSM with high risk sexual behaviours would be motivated to go for regular screening of syphilis and HIV, thereby creating a window of opportunity for behavioural intervention and counselling to modify their risk behaviours, thus reducing their chances of contracting HIV and other STIs.

## **Background**

Surveillance reports from Europe and the United States showed an increase in syphilis cases and similar trends had been observed among clients in Integrated Treatment Centre and the SHS clinics. Over the past several years, increases in syphilis cases among MSM had been reported in various US cities and areas. In some outbreaks, high rates of HIV-coinfection were documented, ranging from 20% to 70%. In Hong Kong, there had been an increasing trend in the incidence of infectious syphilis in SHS attendees despite a decrease in other STIs. In addition, concomitant diagnosis of HIV and syphilis among MSM had also increased in recent years.

Chancres (genital sores) caused by syphilis make it easier to transmit and acquire HIV infection sexually. For those who are infected with syphilis, there is an increased risk of acquiring HIV when exposed. The genital ulcers caused by syphilis can bleed easily, and when they come into contact with oral and rectal mucosa during sex, can increase the infectiousness of, and susceptibility to, HIV.

Syphilis is easy to cure, especially at its early stages. Appropriate antibiotic treatment will usually cure a syphilis infection at its early stage. As effective treatment is available, it is important that persons whose sexual behaviours put them at risk of STIs be screened for syphilis on an on-going basis for early diagnosis.

## **Aims, Objectives and Target Audience**

This campaign was developed in the context of enhancing HIV prevention among MSM, with the main aim being to increase STI awareness (primarily syphilis) in the MSM community.

The objectives were:

- a. To raise awareness of STIs (in particular to the imminent threat of syphilis) in the MSM community;
- b. To promote safer sex practice;
- c. To encourage MSM to attend to sexual health and have regular syphilis and HIV testing; and
- d. To increase knowledge and capacity of frontline workers so as to promote prevention of STIs such as syphilis and HIV

The MSM community, including homosexuals and bisexuals, was the target audience of this campaign. MSM aged 20-39 was the focus of this campaign as MSM of this age group had the most newly diagnosed HIV cases.

## **Details of the Campaign**

This nine-month campaign in MSM lasted from June 2009 to February 2010 and consisted of three major components, namely syphilis awareness programme, safer sex promotion and syphilis testing promotion.

A social marketing approach was adopted in the planning as well as the delivery of the Campaign. Better understanding of the target audience, such as their likes or dislikes, the souvenirs which they like, their health attitudes, and their views towards relationships, was achieved via market research involving the MSM HIV Prevention Working Group, MSM peers and owners of gay venues. The information was triangulated with data from other sources such as researches, feedback from frontline workers, peer focus groups, evaluations of previous MSM HIV prevention campaigns, so as to form a solid base for the development and implementation of the Campaign.

Clear behavioural goals such as increased condom use and increased HIV and syphilis testing were set. The Campaign adopted “Movies” as the central theme. Promotional materials were developed around this central theme through drawing inspiration from past movies popular or well received among the gay community, and were aimed to

help arouse interest from, and capture the attention of, the target audience. In the development of the promotional materials and embedded health messages, segmentation was achieved through targeting MSM in different relationship status, namely those who were single and available, those in committed one to one relationships and those who were in open relationships. Intervention and marketing mix were achieved through the involvement of multiple publicity venues and means, including gay bars and saunas; non-gay venues which were frequented by gay men such as chic cafes, boutiques and bookstores; gay magazines; gay websites and chat rooms. Further engagement of the gay community was achieved through the Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, a popular event among the local gay community. Promotional banners and shorts were broadcast before each film screening during the Festival and advertisements were placed at the Festival official guide.

Key messages delivered during the Campaign included:

- Syphilis and other STIs are on the rise among MSM
- Syphilis and other STIs increase the risk of passing and acquiring HIV
- Having unprotected sex will increase risk of syphilis and other STIs infection, including HIV
- Having multiple sex partners may increase the risk of syphilis and other STIs
- Unprotected sex is risky and persons with high risk sexual behaviours are encouraged to have regular testing for syphilis and HIV
- Symptoms for syphilis and other STIs may not be obvious and frequently there are no noticeable symptoms
- You can look after your own sexual health and the sexual health of your partner.
- There is curative treatment for syphilis and if you are worried about contracting STIs, please contact your local healthcare provider/doctor for testing

Segmentation was addressed through the development of more tailor-made messages targeting MSM in different relationship status, with the following examples:

- For those in committed one-to-one relationships: “Protect yourself and your sweetie. Use a condom and don’t bring syphilis home.”, and “Romantic buddy, have sex safely”
- For single hunks: “Fighter! Don’t battle it out with syphilis! Put on the plastic!” and “Syphilis does not care whether you have a 6-pack or a big belly. Be smart, use a condom”
- For those in open relationships: “Fraternity Club: Enjoying sex ≠ Taking risks”

Publicity and promotional materials and give-away items produced for distribution included 800 posters (8 designs), 50 000 postcards with condoms and lubricant packs, 40 000 desk-top tissue boxes, 150 000 coasters, 50 000 tin cans with condom and lubricant packs, 5 000 information leaflets and 1 000 information booklets on syphilis, 16 000 HIV and syphilis testing cards. The publicity materials were launched in phases so as not to flood venues with materials and ensure attention to certain key posters and materials at various time periods, as well as help achieve a bigger coverage in time term. A 10-sec TV animation commercial promoting the Gay Men HIV Testing Hotline 2117 1069 was also produced and being broadcast in MSM venues during the Campaign.

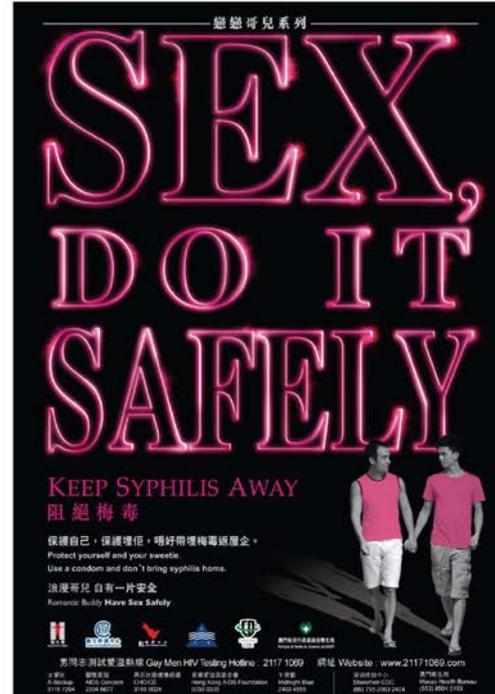
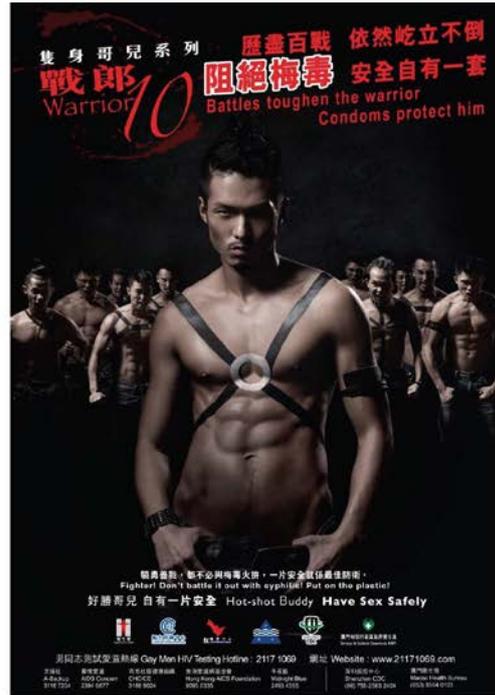
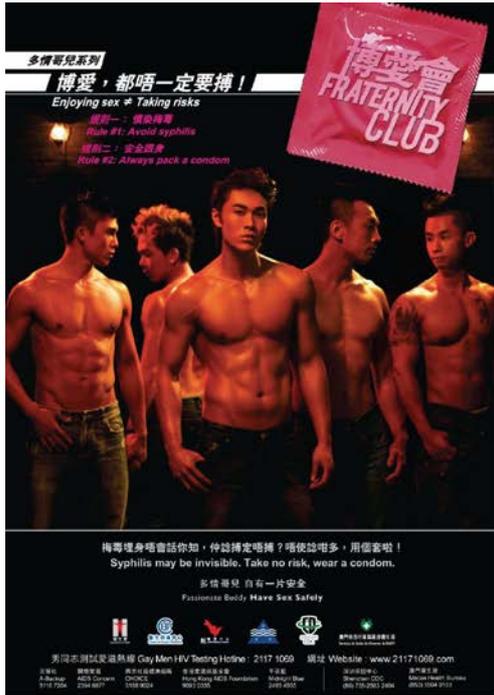
The Social Hygiene Service, a key partner in the Campaign, organized a half-day seminar/workshop on syphilis for frontline health professionals and NGO workers and helped produce a booklet and a health pamphlet with information on syphilis. December 2010 was also designated as the testing month for syphilis testing for MSM, during which extra session was scheduled each week to cater specifically for MSM clients at one of most frequented Social Hygiene Clinics. Apart from promotion via the Campaign activities, publicity about the testing month was further achieved with the help of NGO workers during outreach work targeting MSM, as well as a promotional event held during the month at a popular local gay disco.

## **Evaluation of the Campaign**

A university research team was commissioned to carry out an evaluation of the Campaign. The evaluation study included three parts. First, three focus groups were conducted with gay men and NGO workers to obtain comments on the Campaign. Second, field observation and informal interviews with stakeholders at the venues were done to observe on site promotion of the Campaign materials and views of venues operators on implementation and acceptance of the Campaign. Third, a questionnaire survey was done to investigate the coverage and acceptance of the Campaign activities among MSM. The use of this mix-method study for evaluation had facilitated more in-depth understanding on the effectiveness of the Campaign and generation of practical recommendations obtained from the field. Overall, the Campaign resulted in very good coverage among MSM who frequented bars and saunas (85% recall of the Campaign) and fair for MSM recruited online (51% recall of the Campaign). Overall, the Campaign was perceived to be very effective in promoting safer sex (84% among those exposed to the Campaign) but fair in syphilis prevention (56% among those exposed to the Campaign). The designs of promotional materials used were attractive for gay men while messages delivered were perceived to be not direct enough and in some cases did not appear to be very clear to the target audience. Display of materials in gay venues

was well received and welcome while there was concern among some interviewees that display of those materials in non-gay venues had the potential of stereotyping and further stigmatizing gay men. Findings from the study will help inform future HIV prevention activities targeting MSM.

Sample posters



## Sample souvenirs

Condom & lub packs



Postcards with condom & lub packs



Testing alert card



Promotion at a gay disco

