

Joint effort needed to curb prejudice, encourage men to use social services

Last week we asked if readers think discrimination and stigma are reasons why only 10 per cent of MSM (men who have sex with men) in Việt Nam use public health services. We also asked what readers think should be done to change that. These are some of the answers we received.

Nguyễn Chung Tài, Hà Nội HIV carrier

I'm not surprised by these numbers because the real numbers are always more than those published in reports by the UN or other organisations.

It is understandable that many gay men find it hard to come out, especially those who are infected with HIV. Other people still keep their conservative thinking toward gay people, mostly older generations.

Another problem, in my opinion, is the "easy" lifestyle of a great part of the gay community. Their habit of not being faithful to one partner but changing partners regularly plays an important role in spreading HIV/AIDS in the MSM community particularly and in society in general.

How can we change that? I think this depends on both sides. On the one hand, the gay community should recognise that they need to maintain a healthier lifestyle. On the other hand, society needs to change their attitude towards gay people, stop looking at them with disgust.

The Ministry and departments of Health need to create and apply more practical programmes to promote HIV/AIDS prevention. Current efforts are too short-term and unrealistic. At the same time, our education system needs to insert sex education into teaching programmes for secondary school and above, because our students are no longer as innocent as before living in the internet era. Schools need to play an important role in teaching students how to live a healthy and practical lifestyle and families need to start talking about sex to their children. Internet is a great school for the kids, but letting them surf the internet by themselves is dangerous.

Nguyễn Thanh My Actionaid Brussels Belgium

In my opinion, gay people, both women and men, rarely use health services because they are afraid of the discrimination from their families and society.

There are many people who think homosexuality is a sickness. As a result, it's very difficult for the homosexuals to lead a normal life. The more they hide them-

Your say

Next week

Hà Nội's system of street names and house numbering is not straightforward, and sometimes people fail to get their mail. The problem is set to get more complicated as the capital multiplies by three to become Greater Hà Nội, spreading across a total area of 3,300sq.km.

This will mean an additional 300 streets from Hà Đông and Sơn Tây cities, 70 per cent of which will share the names of streets in the old capital.

Hà Nội People's Committee is considering renaming these streets, which will cost Government and residents a lot of money.

Are there a lot of streets with the same names in your hometown? If so, does it cause problems?

What are your suggestions for Hà Nội to resolve the issue? Is a postcode system important?

We welcome your opinions via e-mail to: opinion.vietnamnews@gmail.com - or by fax to 84 (0) 43 933 2311. Letters can be sent to The Editor, Việt Nam News, 11 Trần Hưng Đạo Street, Hà Nội.

Replies to next week's question must be received by Thursday morning, March 5.

selves, the less they use social services.

To improve this, I think we need to have a wide and appropriate information and education programme so that MSM understand their rights and can receive the necessary information about the social services available to them. This programme should also target greater public awareness to encourage sympathy and understanding that will hopefully encourage the gay community to be more open and more willing to use social services.

As for the health service, it should offer comfortable and sensitive access. High confidentiality is very important.

Đinh Thái Sơn, Hà Nội FHI Việt Nam

As a supervisor and manager to HIV prevention activities for the MSM community in some big cities in Việt Nam, I realise that the greatest obstacle to encouraging MSM from using health services is discrimination. We need to focus on educating and training people working in these services about the mentality and sensitivity of the people they are dealing with.

It takes time to change public opinion, so social administration agencies should pay more attention to leading people's positive awareness of MSM, as well as supporting strong projects and programmes working on HIV prevention and intervention for this group of people.

Tom Miller, California

It would be wise for the Government and society to "bite the bullet" since this is not "their" problem, it is "our" problem. Excluding the gay community from our thinking and action excludes people we know and love, and the sooner we can accept "gayness" as a reality and a legitimate part of our society

and not a threat, the sooner the healing - physical and psychological - will occur. This is asking many to make a big step since all their lives the idea of homosexuality has been reinforced as evil. American writer and social critic Mark Twain once said "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness." The same can be said about getting to know the gay community.

Joshua Riedel, Hà Nội

In addition to overcoming general discrimination against gays in Hà Nội and HCM City, it seems to me that a more immediate and feasible issue to confront and overcome is improving the channels of communication within the gay community. Even if access to health services is limited in Việt Nam due, in part, to the general population's discrimination against gay men, the 10 per cent of gay men who do take advantage of the health services offered should share their information with the other 90 per cent of men who do not use those services, helping to introduce them to gay-friendly clinics and doctors. With the assistance and encouragement of others within the gay community, perhaps men who do not currently think they have access to health services would come to discover that it is possible to stay healthy and gay in Việt Nam.

Dr Nick Medland, Việt Nam Chair MSM Subcommittee HIV/AIDS Technical Working Group

Evidence from around the world, and increasingly from Việt Nam, suggests that MSM feel stigmatised and discriminated against in daily life and when coming into contact with services and with other authorities. Many go through life trying to avoid such contact and actively try to stay hidden. Reaching out with

information, education, support, assistance and health care is that much more difficult.

We know well how MSM can protect themselves and their partners from HIV infection: to be well informed about condom use and HIV prevention; to feel confident and strong enough in their own hearts to want to protect themselves; to be able to go to a health service in a supportive and safe environment for an HIV test from time to time; to receive the support and friendship of their peers.

Việt Nam has been doing amazing work in a short period of time to help prevent the rapid spread of HIV infection that we have seen in neighbouring countries. However, this is just a beginning and an enormous amount is yet to be done. We support and applaud the work of the government in this.

There are a lot of inspiring individuals and groups doing great work in MSM communities. We need to be open in our support for them. The press and our leaders need to give the message that we will take care of every member of our society, that it's OK to be gay. Then, and only then, will we have a chance to reduce the threat that the HIV epidemic poses to each and every one of us.

Nathalie Miller, Hà Nội Entrepreneurs du Monde, Country Director

I'm not sure if MSM's lack of access to HIV/AIDS health service is reflective of homophobia. The driving force of spreading HIV/AIDS in Việt Nam is intravenous drug use (IDU); although the liaison between HIV/AIDS and drug use has diminished in recent years in Việt Nam, the link is irrefutable. The lack of access to HIV/AIDS health services that you noted with MSM populations is also prevalent among IDU populations who are not, of course, all men having sex with men - so I would hesitate to argue that the reason behind this phenomenon is homophobia.

That said, there is definitely ongoing stigma in Việt Nam against gay men - and perhaps more so against gay women, a group that you didn't include in your question.

In Việt Nam, where kinship is of utmost importance and pressure lies on children to continue the family line, discrimination against gay people might also center around this idea that being gay means a departure from the "family" as it is normally understood. Yet gay men and women have always been parents and will continue to be parents, which is important for Vietnamese people to realise. — VNS