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PRESS RELEASE

FUNDING CUTS HIT GAY HEALTH ***Gay men lose valuable quit smoking service*** ***NHS fails to address gay health inequality***

London, 23 February 2007 -- London's NHS trusts are failing to provide adequate health care to gay men trying to quit smoking as funding for GMFA's smoking cessation course dries up. National No Smoking Day approaches on March 14th and the smoke free legislation banning public smoking is imminent, yet gay men are being deprived of one of the most successful smoking cessation course in the country.

"We have been helping gay men to stop smoking for over five years and the new law coming into play on July 1st means that the demand for the course is greater than ever," said Matthew Hodson, Head of Programmes for GMFA. "Our tailored gay men's course improves their chances of quitting. Sending gay men to generic services just doesn't make sense."

While NHS smoking session courses offer an average 55% success rate¹, many more gay men who set a quit date with GMFA manage to stop (68%).

Gay men are more likely to smoke than their straight counterparts so the need for this service is clear. A staggering 41% of gay men are smokers - rising to 60 per cent for 25 to 34 year olds – way above the national average of 25 per cent.² For HIV positive gay men the story is worse still as they are more likely than other gay men to be heavy smokers, smoking 10 or more cigarettes per day.³

"GMFA volunteers have been doing this very important work for several years now. Smoking prevalence in the gay community remains unacceptably high and this summer we have a never to be repeated opportunity when England goes smoke free on July 1st Commented Martin Dockrell, Campaigns and Policy Manager, ASH. I cannot find the words to describe the abject folly of closing this service at this time."

With 70% of gay and bisexual men supporting the smoke free legislation and 43% agreeing that smoking will become less socially acceptable within the gay community after the ban,² it's easy to see why many want to quit. One survey showed that 67.3% of London's gay smokers would like to give up, with a further 16.9% undecided.³ But as GMFA's course is declined funding, many of those who want to stop smoking will not get the help they need.

"Gay men are among those at the highest risk from smoking related disease. Providing tailored support for men to quit together has been a real success story," added Ben Youdan, Chief Executive of No Smoking Day. "To lose this valuable service so close to smoke free legislation could be real step backwards from helping those who benefit most."

Medical research agrees that there is need for services that address the specific needs of the gay community without prejudice or judgment.⁴ There is also evidence that if healthcare professionals have little understanding of gay men's

specific health needs, or little desire to understand their social and sexual lives, the standard of care is low.⁵ This low level of care has repeatedly been linked to a homophobic healthcare professionals^{6,7} and it has been estimated that homophobic attitudes exist among 20% of UK medical providers.⁸ In addition, a survey by the university of South Hampton, over half of the respondents felt that the views of gay community are not taken into account when planning local services.⁹

“To provide a service that helps gay men to quit smoking, you need to understand the cultural, social and personal needs of gay men. It’s clear that many general services can not offer that kind of support,” added Hodson.

In another blow to quit attempts, many gay men in London are also being denied access to beneficial new drugs suggested on the GMFA course for those having difficulty quitting. Many patients still have to pay for them privately while GPs await the lengthy NICE guidance process.

- ENDS -

If more information about this or any other of GMFA’s campaigns and actions is required,

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Notes to Editor

Health consequences of smoking for HIV positive people

- It may be more difficult for those with HIV to quit. The added stresses of managing HIV infection can often increase the need for a form of stress management and smoking can provide some stress relief.
- The risk of cancer is higher in HIV-positive individuals than in the general population. The cumulative affect of this combined with the increased cancer risk due to smoking causes a major health concern.
- The side effects of HIV medication can also exacerbate problems caused by smoking. High blood pressure, risk of heart attack, high cholesterol, and sexual dysfunction, for example, are all linked with both HIV treatment and smoking.
- Smokers are more likely to get oral infections than non smokers. As many HIV-related conditions affect the mouth, causing symptoms such as ulcers, dry mouth and painful lesions (usually an early signs of immune damage), smoking can lead to these symptoms becoming more extreme.
- High blood pressure and raised blood fats are major risk factors for stroke and these can be side effects of some anti-HIV drugs. Stopping smoking reduces the risk of stroke and so is recommended for those on causative HIV treatments.

About GMFA:

GMFA was established in 1992 and is the UK's leading charity dedicated to gay men's health. GMFA's mission is to improve gay men's health by increasing the control they have over their own lives. We believe that the best health promotion for gay men comes from gay men themselves, and so we use the knowledge and ideas of our 170 volunteers (most of them gay men) to design and plan our thought provoking sexual health interventions. Yearly we deliver three new mass media campaigns in the gay press to disseminate up to date information regarding HIV and STIs to the gay male community. Independent surveys have concluded that our campaigns reach up to 55% of the London gay population and we are the most reliable agency at reaching gay men. In addition to this, we distribute our own health magazine, FS, free to London's gay bars and clubs to further educate gay men about relationships, their bodies, general health and STIs. Annually, we deliver 1000 hours of group work to educate gay men in safer sex, and over the last fourteen years have provided courses for over 10,000 gay men. We have recently launched two new websites containing information for gay men on sex and sexual health (www.gmfa.org.uk/sex) and details of sexual health services available for gay men in London (www.gmfa.org.uk/londonservices). Over the next couple of months we intend to launch websites for HIV positive gay men and a gay sports and social groups site. All of our sites can be accessed at www.gmfa.org.uk.