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PRESS RELEASE

LONDON HIV PREVENTION TOPS UK

HIV Rise Reflects Increased Testing Not New Infections

London 29 November 06 – A new study¹ has shown for the first time that the rise in HIV diagnoses among gay men and men who have sex with men in the UK is a result of an increase in the number of men testing, rather than an increase in the number of men infected each year.

Throughout the UK, the rates of new infection in this group appear to have remained stable.

The data also shows that, compared to the rest of the UK, London HIV prevention and awareness initiatives seem to have a greater impact. Even with the substantial increase in HIV testing, there has been no increase in the number of gay men under 35 diagnosed with HIV each year in London between 1997 and 2004, compared with a 110 percent increase outside London. For gay men over 35, London has seen a 55 percent increase in the number of HIV diagnoses compared to a 187 percent increase outside London.

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“It seems that the number of gay men becoming infected with HIV each year has remained steady. Instead, we are seeing more people who are already infected coming forward to test,” said Professor Jonathan Elford from City University London, a co-author on the study. “Among young gay men in London, the story is better still. Even though there was a substantial increase in the percentage of young men coming forward to test in London, we saw no increase in the number of new HIV diagnoses in this group”

Between 1997 and 2004, the number of low and high risk gay men testing for HIV went up by 84 percent in London and 76 percent outside London. While London saw a greater increase in HIV tests, the number of new diagnosis in all age groups was much lower with only a 24 percent increase in positive HIV diagnoses compared with 146 percent outside London.

“So long as gay men continue to be infected, we can not afford to become complacent,” said Matthew Hodson, head of Programmes at gay men’s health charity GMFA. “However, considering the increased numbers of men testing in both low and high risk groups, to have no increase in the number of HIV diagnosis in younger gay men in London is excellent news. Clearly London is doing something right. If we had seen similar increases in HIV diagnoses as outside London, we’d have over 1000 more positive gay men each year.”

The study concludes that the increase in HIV diagnoses among gay men in the UK since 1997 reflects an increase in HIV testing rather than a rise in incidence and that the substantial increase in the uptake of HIV

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testing in recent years highlights the recent success of sexual health promotion in reducing the number of gay men with undiagnosed HIV.

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Notes to editor

About GMFA:

GMFA was established in 1992 and is the only charity dedicated to gay men's health in the UK. Despite progress towards legal equality, gay men still suffer from inequalities in health. Gay men account for 75 percent of new HIV infections in the UK. They are at a greater risk of sexual and mental health problems and are more likely to be affected by cancer and illnesses related to drug and alcohol use. GMFA's mission is to improve gay men's health by increasing the control they have over their own lives. The majority of our work is on HIV and STI prevention within the London area. Yearly we deliver 3 new mass media campaigns in the gay press to disseminate up to date information regarding HIV and STIs to the gay male community. Independent evaluation has found that our campaigns reach up to 55% of the London gay population. In addition to this we distribute our own health magazine, FS, free to a variety of London 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 believe that the best health promotion for gay men comes from gay men themselves, and so our campaigns and actions are developed by volunteers, both HIV positive and negative, most of them gay men.

About the study:

The research, conducted by Sarah Dougan and colleagues at the Health Protection Agency, looked at HIV diagnoses in the UK between 1997 and 2004. The research, co-

authored by Professor Jonathan Elford at City University London, has been peer reviewed and published in the journal Sexually Transmitted Infections

References

1. Sarah Dougan et al. *Does the recent increase in HIV diagnoses among men who have sex with men in the United Kingdom reflect a rise in HIV incidence or increased uptake of HIV testing?* STI Published Online First: 9 November 2006. doi:10.1136/sti.2006.021428