Upfront

THERE'S A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SERIOUS RISK AND VIRTUALLY NO RISK.

Drunken jail sex and HIV hysteria >11

GAY MEN'S HEALTH SUMMIT

MOST GAY YOUTH NOT SUICIDAL

Gay men's health summit looks at mental wellness

Nathaniel Christopher

DESPITE THE RASH OF SUICIDES reported this fall, one researcher says the majority of gay youth are not suicidal.

Having examined BC Adolescent Health Surveys from 1997, 2003 and 2007, Dr Elizabeth Saewyc, of UBC and the McCreary Centre Society, presented some positive realities to the sixth annual Gay Men's Health Summit held Nov 25 and 26 at SFU Harbour Centre.

"Two out of three gay or bi boys had no suicidal ideation," Saewyc says. "And suicide attempts are even less common: 74 percent of gay or bi boys did not attempt suicide in the past year. Although the rates are higher than hetero teens, the majority of LGB teens are not attempting suicide, thinking about suicide, harming themselves — and that's good news."

Saewyc's study, "Strong in Spite of Stigma," also found that most gay and bi teens reported a lack of anxiety, despair and self-harm.

But government and policy makers tend to be problem-focused, Saewyc notes. So if an organization wants funding, it has to present a problem to get attention.

The healthy and happy gay and bi youth she describes in her report benefit from family connectedness, school connectedness, supportive teachers, other caring adults and self-esteem.

"Family connectedness reduces the odds of suicidal attempts by 96.5 percent," she says. "School connectedness has an even stronger impact. When they feel safe, cared about and by their school, they are 98 percent less likely to attempt suicide."

Normally these teen studies ask about suicidal tendencies and unhappiness, Saewyc acknowledges. But if researchers stop focusing on the negative and look at the flip side instead, they may find more good news than bad.

Organized by the Community Based Research Centre (CBRC) in partnership with the Health Initiative for Men (HIM) and the BC Centre for Disease Control, this year's health summit tried to reshape gay men's thinking about their mental wellness.

Dr Terry Trussler of the CBRC thinks gay adults are eager to talk about their health. He presented preliminary findings from the 2010 Sex Now Survey, which drew nearly 8,000 respondents in every province and territory. "It's a great population of men out there who have something to say."

The survey found "huge differences" between men who identify as gay and those who don't but have sex with men.

Men who have sex with men but identify as straight or bisexual showed higher income levels, lower marginalization, lower mental distress and lower sexual risk, the study suggests.

Gay men's health

ARE WE THERE YET?

Olivier Ferlatte

Gay men's health issues are not yet a priority in mainstream society, says Olivier Ferlatte of the Community Based Research Centre. "[If we were there], this room would be full of leaders and policy makers." NATHANIEL CHRISTOPHER PHOTO

Phillip Banks

"I think it's us oppressing each other by reducing or eliminating the choices we make. Just as some of us judge sex pigs, some of us are judging people who want to have children, and I think that's bullshit," says Phillip Banks. "We'll be there when we as gay men aren't oppressing others for the choices we are making." NATHANIEL CHRISTOPHER PHOTO

OINK!

Focusing on pleasure

LESSONS FROM PIG SEX

Nathaniel Christopher

NATHANIEL CHRISTOPHER PHOTO

Pigs have a lot to teach gay men about healthy living, says Duncan MacLachlan, the gay men's outreach coordinator for the AIDS Committee of Toronto.

MacLachlan spoke at the Desire and Defiance: Pig Sex Project portion of the Gay Men's Health Summit.

"I am a 43-year-old muscle short boy. I am a total pig, which means I like most of the things you guys in this site love: fisting, big dildos, cocks, big rosebuds, hairy men, lean men, muscle men, big bears, daddies, bikers, skinheads, tattoos, piercings, nipple play, WS, and the list goes on," MacLachlan read from one profile posted on recon.com, a hook-up site for men into fetish gear.

The Pig Sex Project is an expanding series of community consultations with men who identify as sex pigs or who are interested in pig sex. Before coming to Vancouver, the project held two consultations in Toronto.

"The second one occurred because at the first one some guy said, 'This is amazing. Finally, this is really exciting and we want more of it!' And, of course, being pigs, that'd be appropriate," MacLachlan notes.

The Vancouver workshop, held at Steamworks bathhouse after the summit, elicited great discussion, according to co-organizer Jody Jollimore of the Health Initiative for Men.

"I would say that, by all accounts, the event was a great success. In the end we had 27 gay guys participate in the workshop. Five facilitators (four from Toronto, one from here) met with small groups in various locations at the bathhouse, including two sling rooms and the gym."

HIV prevention work is traditionally focused on risks and vulnerabilities, notes MacLachlan, so by focusing on pleasure, the Pig Sex Project represents a new approach.

"I think that we're in a time and a place where there's real need for celebrating sexuality," he says.

"In the work that I do, and among the folks I talk to in the community, there's a real sense of wanting to talk about pleasure, wanting to talk about what we do well, and who. We're creative particularly with sexuality. This is a real strength and a real source of resilience for us."

MacLachlan describes the project's participants as pro-sex, pro-choice, anti-stigma and very much about pleasure and desire.

He also notes the discrimination some pig-sex enthusiasts face from within the gay community. "With guys into pig sex, these guys are kind of sexual outlaws and some would say deviant," he says.

RURAL REALITY

Northern Exposure

LIMITED HEALTH ACCESS IN PRINCE GEORGE

Nathaniel Christopher

If you're a gay man in a health region that covers two-thirds of British Columbia and seven percent of the population, access to a doctor, never mind a gay-friendly doctor, is a luxury, according to Dr Theresa Healy, a regional manager for the Northern Health Authority.

"While they make up a comparatively small portion of the population, these men have health needs that, if overlooked or unmet, take a large toll on them, their social networks and society at large," Healy writes in a report on the health and well-being of men and boys in the region, which includes a section on gay men's health issues.

Men's health in general is poor and poorer still in BC's northern regions compared to the Lower Mainland, Healy says. Add being a gay man to the equation, and "you're looking at triple jeopardy."

Healy describes the northern landscape as hyper-masculinized. The prevalent notion of being a man's man limits gay men's access to health services, she says.

"They don't talk about bodies, and it creates added danger for gay men in these work places," she says. "Someone said you're going to be in a bush camp for months on end. How could you be out in those conditions?"

Healy, who describes the status report as a beginning, says the Northern Health Authority is working on programming to attract a diverse cross-section of new healthcare practitioners to the region.

"We're planning a big conference in February in partnership with a local organization, and in that conference we're hoping to attract men across the spectrum of age, race, class, sexual orientation."

For gay men who may not feel comfortable attending a conference, community consultations are also in the works, she adds.