

BCN checkpoint: three-year experience (2007-2009) of a Community Based Centre for MSM in Barcelona (Spain) shows high effectiveness in HIV detection

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Introduction

The HIV epidemic in Western Europe is mostly driven by Men who have Sex with Men (ECDC, UNAIDS, WHO). Barcelona and its area have developed in the past decades as an attractive place for MSM. Studies show that almost 50% of all new cases of HIV diagnosis in this area are in MSM.

Also, a high HIV incidence not only depends on individual responsibility, but also on the Community Viral Load (CVL). This means that even modest levels of sexual risk-taking can result in very high transmission rates. In order to lower the CVL, apart from continuing individual-level intervention, other actions should be added, like those which are able to test MSM in an appropriate environment and to raise awareness about their status, to offer treatment for HIV infection (bringing them into the medical system), and to help around maintaining sexual safety over long periods of time.

Moralistic and/or homophobic attitudes by Health Care Professionals are among the biggest barriers to an effective HIV screening in MSM population. Therefore, Projecte dels NOMS-Hispanosida implemented in 2006 BCN Checkpoint (a Community Based Centre for MSM) dedicated to early detection of HIV and syphilis and to assure better care (IAS2008, TUPE0424). We have evaluated the results of the three-year experience (2007-2009) of this project.

Methodology

Counselors of BCN Checkpoint are all gay and most of them are HIV positive. This guarantees that MSM have a safe space, in the middle of the gay neighbourhood, where they can talk openly about their sexuality, risk perceptions and sexual safety, while they can do a rapid HIV and syphilis test (Determine™ HIV-1/2 and Determine™ Syphilis TP).

Our key points are peer counselors, introduction for the first time in Spain of rapid HIV and syphilis tests, and a specific outreach to our community through campaigns and presence of our volunteers in clubs, discos, bathhouses and other gay venues.

The Voluntary Testing and Counseling (VTC) is anonymous, for free and takes up around one hour. Men with an HIV positive result, confirmed by a Western Blot test, receive emotional support, and are offered an appointment in one of Barcelona's HIV Health Care Units. At the same time they are given the possibility to join another program of Projecte dels NOMS-Hispanosida, called INFOTRAT. This peer-led program, which is exclusively for people living with HIV and AIDS, has two goals: to meet other people in the same situation, and to learn more about HIV/AIDS and their treatment and management.

Men with an HIV negative result receive counseling in order to maintain sexual safety, and are invited to repeat the test every 6 or 12 months. Counseling offered by BCN Checkpoint also includes education to avoid discriminatory attitudes towards HIV positive men within the MSM community.

Specific Campaigns



Volunteers



Results

TABLE 1

Year	Tests performed	Persons tested	HIV+ results	Prevalence
2007	1.098	938	37	3,9%
2008	1.272	1.162	72	6,2%
2009	2.496	2.216	113	5,1%
Total	4.866	4.316	222	

In 2008 in Catalonia (7 Million inhabitants) a total of 293.304 tests were performed (HIV prevalence = 0,85%) in public hospitals and by primary care physicians. Source: CEEISCAT

TABLE 3

	Distribution of HIV cases by precedence (2007-2009)								
	2007			2008			2009		
	Total	HIV+	%	Total	HIV+	%	Total	HIV+	%
Spain	574	15	2,6	740	30	4,1	1.416	64	4,5
Rest of Europe	140	4	2,9	160	11	6,9	307	14	4,6
North America	7	0	0,0	12	3	25,0	22	1	4,5
Latin America	202	17	8,4	231	24	10,4	435	32	7,4
Africa	8	1	12,5	7	4	57,1	8	0	0,0
Asia	2	0	0,0	10	0	0,0	25	1	4,0
Australia and New Zealand	5	0	0,0	2	0	0,0	3	1	33,3
Total	938	37		1.162	72		2.216	113	

TABLE 2

	Distribution of HIV cases by age groups (2007-2009)								
	2007			2008			2009		
	Total	HIV+	%	Total	HIV+	%	Total	HIV+	%
≤ 24 years	122	3	2,5	160	11	6,9	328	10	3,0
25 - 34 years	470	15	3,2	554	38	6,9	1.061	54	5,1
35 - 44 years	265	13	4,9	340	16	4,7	632	41	6,5
≥ 45 years	81	6	7,4	108	7	6,5	195	8	4,1
Total	938	37		1.162	72		2.216	113	

TABLE 4

	HIV Cases reported in MSM		
	2007	2008	2009
City of Barcelona*	221	222	191
BCN Checkpoint	37	72	113
%	16,7	32,4	59,2

In order to measure the impact of BCN Checkpoint we compared the number of HIV cases detected in our centre with the number of HIV cases reported in Barcelona (1,6 Million inhabitants).
 *Source: SIDA a Barcelona, Vigilancia epidemiológica. Agència de Salut Pública de Barcelona, 31st December 2009

Conclusions

- BCN Checkpoint has been well accepted by the MSM community, as demonstrated by the satisfactory results from a survey conducted among our clients¹.
- BCN Checkpoint has become a reference centre for the MSM population with concerns about their health.
- The three-year experience of BCN Checkpoint has served as a model to implement community VTC in Spain, France and Portugal.
- Health Authorities should provide adequate funding to ensure the implementation and continuity of Community Based Centres.
- A community approach for VTC is able to reach the Most-At-Risk populations with a minimum of tests and is therefore more cost/effective than an approach to the general public.

¹ Survey on the quality of test services. BCN Checkpoint 2007-2008.

Next steps

- BCN Checkpoint started in 2008 a prospective cohort study (ITACA) among 800 HIV negative MSM in Barcelona in order to monitor the incidence of HIV infection and to identify risk factors associated with seroconversion.
- BCN Checkpoint is participating in an European study (HIV-COBATEST) in collaboration with CEEISCAT (Centre of Epidemiological Studies of HIV-AIDS and STIs of Catalonia) and 17 European partners to promote early diagnosis in Europe by implementing, building and evaluating Community-Based Testing Practices.
- BCN Checkpoint started in 2009 a prospective study (CHECK-EAR) of HIV incidence and prevalence, and incidence of other STIs, Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and related pathologies in 200 HIV negative MSM in collaboration with HIVACAT, Fundació de Lluita contra la SIDA, Fundació Irsi-Caixa, Fundació Clínic de Barcelona and CEEISCAT.

Further Information

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