

Monongalia County Health Department Flexes the Power of Social Media to Deliver Sexual Health Messaging



By Dr. Lee B. Smith, MD, JD, Executive Director and County Health Officer, Monongalia County Health Department

Introduction

In early 2019, Monongalia County Health Department learned that our county seat, Morgantown, West Virginia, was experiencing an outbreak of syphilis. What's more, from information gleaned by a public health investigator, it was revealed that the outbreak was almost exclusively among men who have sex with men (MSM).



Popular dating apps such as Grindr have made it easier for people to hook up, sometimes anonymously. As we set about to get the word out about this outbreak, we wanted to go beyond the typical press release and social media postings to make sure we were really reaching our target audience.

So we decided to contact dating apps to see if they would help us publicize the situation. It ended up being the culmination of a seed of an idea that started about 10 years ago. That's when I attended a Global Health Conference in Washington, D.C. that was focused on combatting HIV in Africa using existing technology.

One speaker had contacted a cell phone provider in South Africa, as well as other providers in sub-Saharan Africa, and negotiated 2% of their airtime to put public health information across cell phone screens as banners or full screens with targeted information for customers.

No one knows more about demographics of their customers than cell phone service providers, and so public

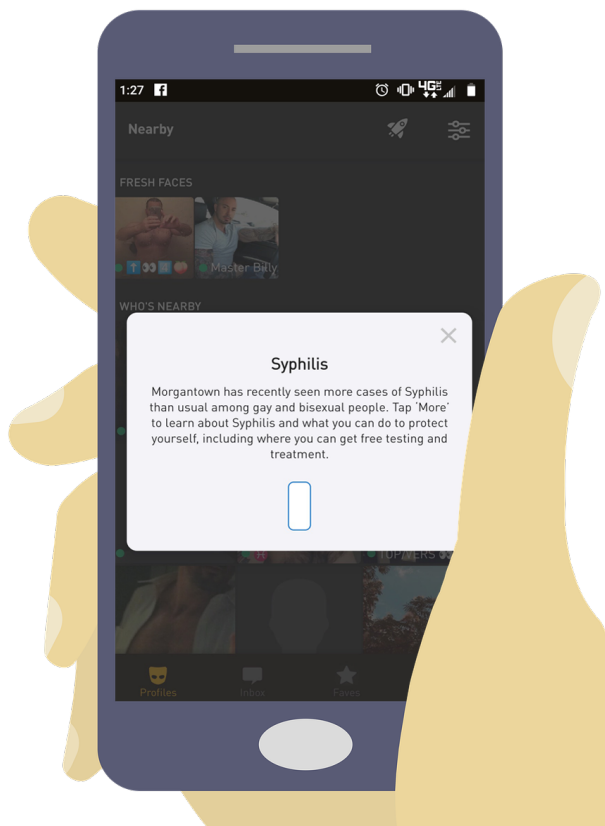
health folks were able to request specific demographics. For example getting age specific information of family planning and protection to women 18-25, or for males, dispelling urban harmful legends like having sex with a virgin to cure HIV, or how to obtain anonymous HIV testing. The idea is absolutely brilliant, and while I wish that I could claim it as my own invention, I filed it away and have chewed on this for a decade trying to find an opportunity to apply it to public health problems.

Earlier this year, with the syphilis outbreak, it came forward in my mind again. I am old enough to remember the 1980s, when HIV was first being seen and actions taken to educate the male gay population about HIV/AIDS. The community took ownership of this problem



educating people regarding how the disease is contracted and closing bath houses that had accommodated anonymous sexual encounters, resulting in numbers declining to a manageable incidence. This occurred before development of antiretroviral medications.

Now we have a new generation who are unaware of previous battles and we, being victims of our own success, have not put necessary resources into fighting these infectious diseases that never really went away.



Today's youth see themselves as nine-foot tall and invincible, and they think there is a cure for everything. In the meantime, we see large numbers of high-risk behaviors that are linked to smartphone apps.

Our Disease Intervention Specialists (DIS) complain that their jobs are now made more difficult by people using dating apps because of this scenario: You and I have a dating app on our phones and while at the mall, your phone and my phone go off notifying us of each other's proximity, allowing us to slip away for some anonymous unprotected sex.

Public health STD clinics personnel and DIS officers are masters of running people to the ground. In days of yore, a person would be contacted and informed that they had been named as a sexual contact of someone with an STD. Now identification work is much more difficult because of anonymity, as well as a lack of common meeting places.

Our DIS officers, however, have found that using various dating apps in finding these contacts to be very beneficial. These apps appear to the uninitiated as a collection of yearbook photographs and serve as a resource for

individuals to scan, not unlike police mug shots. These can be perused until a facial ID is made.

When discussing strategies to deal with these issues, I began to connect the dots. If the dating apps are part of the problem, couldn't they also be part of a solution?

Our public information officer (PIO) was asked to contact some of the popular dating app services in our area. Results were mixed with one company not replying and one saying that they would give us a non-profit rate for our public service announcement.

MONONGALIA COUNTY
19 **MCHD** 29
HEALTH DEPARTMENT

Syphilis is back

Monongalia County is seeing a rise in syphilis, mostly among men who have sex with other men.

But syphilis is curable.


Syphilis starts out as an open sore. If left untreated, syphilis can lead to heart disease, blindness & death.

For free testing & treatment, call 304-598-5119. Monongalia County Health Department

Grindr, however, said, yes, we understand and would like to make our site as safe as we can for our clients. We devised a short message informing anyone who opened the home page of Grindr in a 50-mile radius around Morgantown about the syphilis outbreak, especially among men who have sex with men. Users who clicked on the message would be redirected to a newly created page

Looks like the only thing you didn't catch was his name!

Wear condoms.
Limit partners.
Get tested!





Syphilis

HIV

HPV

Syphilis is on the rise in Morgantown, mostly among men who have sex with other men.

Free testing & treatment.
MCHD Clinical Services
Call 304-598-5119.

message would be redirected to a newly created page on MCHD's website, monchd.org/syphilis, detailing the outbreak, symptoms, treatment and contact information for our free testing and treatment.

The message on Grindr went live at 5 a.m. April 24, 2019. We were quickly bowled over when we heard back from Grindr with astonishing news: from 5 a.m. until 2 p.m. that first day, there had been more than 5,000 unique individuals who looked at our message. It appeared as a fantasy that we could get so much visualization from such a little item.

What's more, as the ad ran weekly through May 25, those numbers grew: 21,933 unique individuals saw the message and 1,999 (9%) tapped on the message to be redirected to our new web page. That's a healthy click-through rate. Then, from late May to Oct. 30, the message, now being run every two weeks, was seen by an additional 39,000 unique individuals. Of those, 2,200, or 5.6%, clicked through to our web page.

That means that in just over four months, 70,121 individuals in a 50-mile radius of Morgantown saw the message. And because the message was displayed on Grindr, the audience was made up of a demographically

targeted group of individuals, many of whom would be interested in this information.

Connecting dots from messaging to reduction in diagnosed cases is not as clear and while numbers of clinic appointments slightly increased, actual number of diagnosed cases increased. Anecdotally, we heard from our clinic patients that for some, they are asymptomatic but were aware of our messaging and came for testing "just in case." One of those individuals ended up being diagnosed in the early stage of syphilis, when treatment is easiest and most effective.

So, keeping the conversation going and improving awareness is a measure of success from which to build the next messages. As a non-native internet user, I was completely flummoxed with the power of social media as a means to push out public health messaging. Who knew?

It is our hope to continue partnering with various agencies to get other public health messaging out. We believe that there is a role for such technology and messaging in the opioid/substance use disorder group. People with dependency issues will see their communication devices as critical equipment.

The larger issue is to open participation by the larger cell phone providers. Our attempts to open a dialogue with AT&T, Verizon, Sprint, etc., have gone nowhere. Perhaps directives from the U.S. Surgeon General, Congress or the White House identifying public health emergencies and giving tax deductions for participation would create opportunities.

Thank You

MCHD appreciates Grindr's willingness to step up and help spread the word about syphilis in Northern West Virginia. After this successful PSA campaign, which will end in late November, MCHD would be happy to partner with Grindr or other networking applications in a similar fashion.



For More Information, Contact:

Dr. Lee B. Smith
Executive Director and
County Health Officer
Monongalia County Health
Department
Email: lee.b.smith@wv.gov
Phone: 304.598.5100



Graphics used in this feature are from the poster "Using Social Media to Educate About Syphilis," created by Dr. Lee B. Smith and Mary Wade Triplett, BS, Public Information Officer, Monongalia County Health Department.

The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of CAF America or the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

About NACCHO

The National Association of County and City Health Officials is the voice of more than 3,000 local health departments across the country. These city, county, metropolitan, district, and tribal departments work every day to ensure the safety of the water we drink, the food we eat, and the air we breathe.

For more information, please contact:

Emily Yox
Program Analyst, Global Health
202.888.0228
eyox@naccho.org

NACCHO

National Association of County & City Health Officials

The National Connection for Local Public Health

www.naccho.org



The mission of the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) is to improve the health of communities by strengthening and advocating for local health departments.

1201 Eye Street, NW 4th Floor Washington, DC 20005

P 202.783.5550 F 202.783.1583

© 2019. National Association of County and City Health Officials