

## Commentary

# Internet Sex and Dating Sites Need Warnings

*For this issue's Commentary column, Peter L. Tenore, MD, discusses risk for infection with HIV or acquisition of sexually transmitted diseases associated with the use of the Internet to find sexual partners and presents results of an informal survey to determine whether Internet sites used to find sexual partners provide warnings about sexually transmitted diseases and HIV. He also calls for the operators of such sites to add warnings to their sites.*

The Internet is emerging as a potential risk factor for HIV and sexually transmitted disease (STD) transmission, notably pornographic Web sites and dating sites that cater to users seeking sexual partners. Users of these sites may be at higher risk for infection with HIV and STDs. In a study of 4507 individuals who use the Internet to find sexual partners, McFarlane and co-workers noted that young adults 18- to 24-years-old underwent significantly less STD and HIV testing than their older counterparts, indicating that young adults "may be at significantly greater risk for STDs than their peers who do not seek sex partners online." The authors state there is an urgent need for online "sexual health promotion."<sup>1</sup>

A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) study of 544 women reporting sex with partners found via the Internet showed a higher number of total lifetime partners and suboptimal condom use, concluding that the Internet has the "potential to spread STDs or HIV with even greater efficiency than ever before imagined," and that "this population needs to be recognized and targeted with STD and HIV education and prevention efforts."<sup>2</sup>

Pornographic Web sites are widespread on the Internet, as evidenced by their income generation of more than \$900,000 yearly in the US. Investigating a gay male population, Kendall concluded that pornography

undermines safer sexual practices.<sup>3</sup> In a study of 986 sexually active men, He and coworkers showed that viewing pornography correlated with the high-risk activity of having multiple sexual partners and that 78% of subjects never used condoms.<sup>4</sup> The danger associated with the high-risk sexual behaviors depicted on these Web sites is underscored by recent reports of HIV seropositivity in the adult film industry.<sup>5</sup>

We wished to determine if opening pages for sites that promote high-risk or unprotected sexual activity provide any readily visible health warnings regarding the potential for HIV and STD transmission. During a 10-day period, working online for 10 minutes per day, we reviewed the opening screens of adult Web sites and Internet dating Web sites servicing those seeking sexual partners. Sites were not entered, as our interest was in the opening pages. The opening screens usually have links to other similar sites that can be reached in seconds, making it simple to view a great deal of sexually explicit material in a short time. Typically, opening screens demonstrated frontal nudity with thinly-veiled, unprotected, high-risk sexual behavior, often with multiple partners, and enticement to use a credit card to pay to enter the Web site for more explicit images. Three or 4 sites per day were viewed for a total of 39 opening screens. Opening screens were examined for health advisories. In no case was any information regarding the risks of contracting HIV or STDs given on the opening screens. There was no information on risk-reduction behavior, condom use, the potential danger of HIV and STD transmission, and there were no health advisories at all.

Given the magnitude of morbidity and mortality caused by HIV in our society, the absence of health warnings seems an obvious omission of important information that should be readily

available to Internet users. In the March 2004 edition of the *International Journal of STD and AIDS*, Green perused 8 "popular" pornographic Web sites in detail, from opening page to entering the sites, to determine "whether or not safer sex messages and/or condom usage were included." He noted that "not a single one of the Web sites' home pages contained written warnings to the viewing public of any sort about HIV/AIDS and/or the advisability of safe sex," and concluded that "Internet pornography does not consistently contain messages or present visual images supporting a safer sex message."<sup>6</sup>

Given the increased risk for HIV and STDs inherent in the behaviors implicitly encouraged by Internet dating and pornographic Web sites, the number of HIV-infected individuals in the adult film industry itself, and the absence of health awareness information in opening screens of these sites, the potential for excess HIV and STD transmission should be recognized. The medical community should take steps to communicate the dangers of high-risk activity to the individuals involved in the production of these Web sites and point out the importance of appropriate health advisories that are easy to identify on the opening screens. Just as the tobacco industry prints health advisories on their products, and restaurants post advisories on the potential dangers of alcohol in pregnancy, it would be prudent for Internet sex-oriented sites to consider similar actions in a good-faith effort to promote better health for users of those sites.

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The Albert Einstein College of Medicine of Yeshiva University methadone clinics provide substance abuse care to some 3500 opiate-dependent patients in 10 clinics in Bronx, NY. Full services for HIV-infected individuals, including medical care, substance abuse treatment with methadone and other modalities, and psychiatric services are provided. HIV and STD transmission information and the need for risk-reduction are consistently reinforced by specific caseworkers dedicated to this topic.

## References

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