



“Drink Like a Barman” for Better Sexual Health?

When Bars Offered Self-Service Drinking Water, Breathalyzers Showed Lower Blood Alcohol Content Among Patrons. Results Could Help HIV Prevention Efforts.

(Oakland; December 14, 2016) -- New research from UC San Francisco and the San Francisco AIDS Foundation has found that when men are offered free, self-service water at gay bars, they're more sober when it's time to go home - a strategy that could reduce new HIV infections through safer sex. The California HIV/AIDS Research Program (CHRP) at the University of California and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) funded this innovative and practical work.

"This intervention has a significant effect in lowering blood alcohol levels and hazardous drinking behaviors," said the study's principal investigator Edwin Charlebois, PhD, MPH, a senior scientist at the UCSF Center for AIDS Prevention Studies. As San Francisco is working toward [“Getting To Zero”](#) new HIV infections, innovative interventions like this one are needed to reach people at risk who may not respond to other, more traditional interventions.

Bars play a central role in gay communities, offering a place where men can socialize in a fun and relaxed setting, safe from homophobia and abuse. Extended happy hours, high-alcohol "heavy pours" and all-you-can-drink promotions are a popular part of gay bar culture.

But drinking can also increase risks for acquiring or transmitting HIV. One study found that between six and 29 percent of new HIV infections are linked to alcohol use. Another reported that binge drinkers engage in more condomless sex than non-binge drinkers, and are more likely to have concurrent partners and exchange sex for drugs or money.

To be sure, drugs like methamphetamine or cocaine pose a greater risk for HIV infection than alcohol. But drinking is far more socially acceptable - and widespread. At least 57 of San Francisco's 357 watering holes have predominantly gay patrons.

While alcoholics or binge drinkers are at special risk, the problem isn't confined to these men, said Charlebois. "Even people with moderate alcohol intake experience a significant impact of drinking on sexual decision-making, condom use and partner choice," he said.

At San Francisco's favorite watering holes, previous targeted outreach strategies have fallen short; HIV continues to spread.

"Outreach is very important work, but we are connecting with people who may or may not be in the best state of mind to have that conversation," said co-investigator Jen Hecht, MPH, senior director of Program Strategy and Evaluation at the San Francisco AIDS Foundation. Instead, Charlebois and Hecht decided to test a broader approach called a "structural intervention," which focuses on changing the environment.

It's long been known that alternating water and alcohol is a successful way to pace drinking and reduce intoxication. But patrons of gay bars reported that water wasn't always easily accessible. The researchers wanted to change that.

For help, the research team turned to bar managers and bartenders, influential figures in the gay community. "We're family to a lot of people," explained Scott Petersen, bar manager of Powerhouse in San Francisco's South of Market neighborhood. "It's surprising how many people call us their home bar or refer to us as family. We're open every day of the year - so we actually have a really good Christmas Eve, Christmas and Thanksgiving."

Two San Francisco gay bars agreed to participate in the intervention, if protected by confidentiality, saying they want to keep patrons safe. In each of these bars, the research team installed free water taps and posters with "drink safely" themes. The posters featured images of attractive bartenders holding inviting glasses of water, with messages like "Drink Like A Barman - Have a Drink, Then Water."

They provided free and convenient water, so patrons didn't need to pull out a wallet or stand in line. In one bar, they added chilled dispensers made of stainless steel. In the second, they installed a water spigot with disposable cups.

Then, they surveyed patrons as they exited the bars. Offering \$1 or \$2 incentives, they administered breathalyzer tests. They also offered "feedback" games, such as an app that compares your blood alcohol level to those of your friends - or notorious celebrities, like Lindsay Lohan and Mel Gibson.

"We tried to make it fun and playful, to engage patrons," said Hecht. "If it is a long and boring experience, they'll keep walking." The same tests were offered to patrons of two so-called "control" bars, where water and messaging were not offered.

Analyses showed that the interventions worked: patrons offered water and poster messaging exited more sober than the patrons of control bars.

"These are exciting results," said Hecht. "We saw significant differences in the reduction in blood alcohol levels and the percentage of people who reported binge drinking."

"This important study shows the potential impact of structural interventions to reduce risk factors which may lead to HIV infection", said George Lemp, DrPH, Director of the California HIV/AIDS Research Program at the University of California Office of the President. "UC is pleased to have supported this groundbreaking study", said Lemp.

The data, which were presented at the International AIDS Conference in Durban, South Africa, showed that patrons at intervention bars were significantly less likely to have high blood alcohol content (0.08 g/dL or above) than patrons at "control" bars where free water wasn't available.

This important issue remains unaddressed: Does reduced drinking translate into safer sex - thus lower risk for HIV transmission? The researchers don't know. That's a tough morning-after question - essentially, quizzing bar patrons about their sexual practices after a night on the town - and demands a different kind of study, they said.

"We want to explore it further" in subsequent research, said Hecht. "We know that alcohol consumption affects sex risk. And we know that what we did affects alcohol consumption. Does it connect? We need to look more closely."

But the study is already changing the practices at some bars, which have installed water dispensers. Drinking water isn't the only tool, the researchers add.

The San Francisco AIDS Foundation is offering "harm reduction" counseling and support services through the Stonewall program to help those with binge drinking. It also has launched a weekly "Smart Drinking Group" for gay and bisexual men. Their experts offer helpful tips, such as taking only a limited amount of cash when going out, and leaving the debit and credit cards at home. They also recommend sticking to beer or wine, skipping mixed drinks.

"We want everyone to have a great night," said Hecht. "If people have a chance to pace their drinking, they have the opportunity to remember what happened in the morning. *They can make choices they feel good about.*"

To support this, the Foundation recently launched "Cheers Queers", a safer drinking campaign that was informed by the PACE study and expands the messaging both in scope and location. Learn more at www.cheersqueers.org.

Jennifer Hecht, Albert Plenty, Jessica Lin, Edwin Charlebois are study co-investigators. The research was funded by the California HIV/AIDS Research Program (CHRP) and the National Institutes of Health. Please visit CHRP at www.californiaaidsresearch.org.