

Dillydallying in Dili

Vol 1, No 3

Three down, one to go

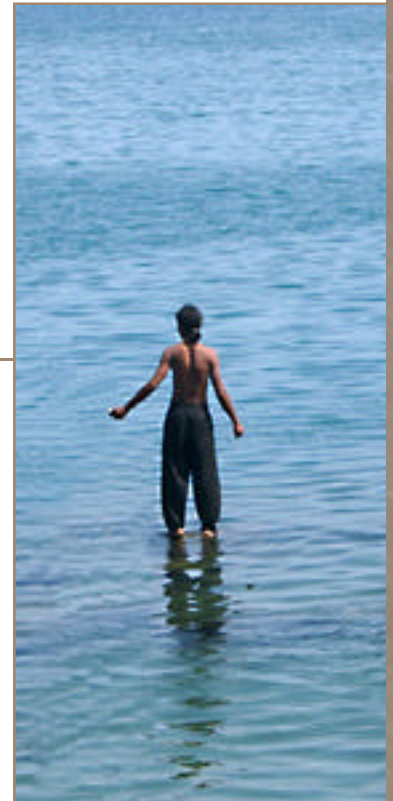


I've just about completed three weeks here in Dili, and have a bit over one more week to go before heading home. I'll have a week-long break in Thailand before continuing on to Vietnam and Laos for a month-long visit.

So far work has been productive. We've organised day-long message and materials development workshops with two of the high-risk groups we're targeting — MSM, or men who have sex with men (photo page 2), and university students. A total of 15 MSM and 8 students, along with representatives from partner NGOs, participated. A number of recommendations for messages and materials were offered. This has led to the development of draft promotional materials targeting MSM and university students.

Next week we'll begin the pretesting of draft materials, and continue with the development of others. Materials will be used by MSM and university peer educators supported by FHI. We've also managed to get the Ministry of Health to adopt our *Behaviour Change Communication Strategy to Prevent the Spread of HIV/AIDS* in East Timor as the strategy to be followed by the government and its partners.

Have drink cart, will travel. One of the scores of vendors working along the harbour front in Dili offering a variety of cold drinks and snacks.



An extremely pious people, East Timorese Catholics routinely walk on water.

The State of HIV/AIDS in East Timor

Until recently, very little was known about HIV and associated risk behaviours in East Timor. Routine surveillance activities among sex workers during the Indonesian occupation identified a small handful of infections, but none of these were in local women.

Condom and lubricant pack distributed by FHI.



Alarm bells were raised by the period of conflict preceding independence, and the high levels of population mobility and economic instability that it brought about. This, together the advent of peace-keepers and other personnel from countries with high HIV prevalence, led people to draw (see *HIV/AIDS* page 2)



Weekend #2, hike#2 — one of the several breaks in our 11.5 km hike west of Dili. It took close to four hours, several liters of water, and lots of sun block.

Draft materials — “Safe, comfortable and happy — use a condom.”

HIV/AIDS from page 1:

parallels with Cambodia. Similar circumstances in Cambodia sparked an HIV epidemic which has developed into the most serious in Asia.

Happily, research in late 2003 showed that the situation is not as bad as had been feared. Some three percent of sex workers in Dili were infected with HIV, but no infection was identified in groups of men who report buying sex in the city. This does not, however, mean there is not cause for concern. Around 15 percent of sex workers and men who

have sex with men in Dili have curable sexual infections such as gonorrhoea and chlamydia. Levels of Type-2 herpes, which helps HIV to spread more quickly, are also quite high — around 30% of high risk men and up to 60% of sex workers are infected.

Most worrying is ongoing risk behaviour. Among groups of men who have cash and are frequently away from their families, visits to sex workers are quite common. In addition, a high proportion of men who have sex with men also have sex with women, providing an open door from high



Some of the MSM who attended the message and materials development workshop resulting in the development of draft promotional materials targeting MSM.

risk to lower risk groups. Although these individuals are choosing not to abstain or be faithful to a spouse, they are not choosing to protect themselves or their partners by using condoms. Only a handful of clients reported always using a condom with non-marital partners, and no sex workers reported always using condoms with East Timorese clients.

The good news is that these high levels of risk appear limited to defined populations. This, together with low levels of current HIV infection provide a historic opportunity to decrease risky behaviour before the virus ever has a chance to take hold and spread into the general population of men, women and children in East Timor.

FHI East Timor Makes a Difference

Rui Carvalho, FHI Program Officer and well known spokesperson for the MSM community in Dili recognizes the difference FHI has made. Prior to FHI involvement in East Timor MSM were a shunned, vulnerable communi-



ty with little access to information...or condoms. “FHI has turned things around for MSM” claims Rui. Working with local NGOs FHI ensures MSM receive information on HIV and STI transmission and prevention. FHI is the first group to support condom distribution targeting MSM.