

## The Analysis of Surveillance and Effectiveness of the “Friendly, Healthy and Safe Business Certification Program” for Gay Saunas

Bo-Jie Chen<sup>1,2</sup>, An-Chun Chung<sup>1</sup>, Meng-Tzu Wu<sup>1</sup>, Chun-Lin Chen<sup>1</sup>, Yi-Mei Chang<sup>1</sup>  
Yu-Mei Yang<sup>3</sup>, Guei-Li Huang<sup>3</sup>, Shih-Yang Yang<sup>4</sup>, Nai-Ying Ko<sup>1,2</sup>

1. Taiwan Love and Hope Association
2. Department of Public Health, College of Medicine  
National Cheng Kung University
3. Division of Planning and Coordination, Centers for Disease  
Control, Ministry of Health and Welfare, Taiwan
4. Taipei Regional Center, Centers for Disease Control, Ministry  
of Health and Welfare, Taiwan

### Abstract

The men who have sexual activities with men are the primary risk group for HIV infection in Taiwan. Gay sauna is a principal place for men to have homosexual activities, and the transmission rate for sexually transmitted disease is high. In 2011, the “friendly, healthy and safe business certification program” for gay saunas has been launched with the intervention of “Sex Police: The surveillance and guidance of safe sexual activity.” This program urges consumers to use condoms during sexual activities. The purposes of this research are: (1) to understand each sauna’s physical features and AIDS-related policies and services; (2) to understand the traits and risk behavior of customers in saunas; and (3) to compare the effectiveness of the “friendly, healthy and safe business certification program” before and after in order to evaluate the policy and formulate health education strategies in the future. Each sauna provides condoms when the consumers enter, and condoms are often placed at the counter. The owners and the employees wish that the public sector can provide free condoms, that the “friendly, healthy and safe business certification program” can be more differentiable, and that the way of certification can be more transparent and standardized. There is no significant difference between certificated and uncertified saunas in terms of their customers’ age, sexual history, sexual health during the past 6 months, and levels of recreational drug use. With respect to the acquirement of condoms, the onsite spots for accessing condoms are more diverse in the certified saunas than the uncertified ones. In addition, the numbers of people having oral sex without condoms differ significantly, as there are more people having oral sex without condoms in certified saunas. This research finds that the average age of the consumers is 34.35 years, and the proportion of consumers under 20 years old is only about 4 %. The results show that sauna is not the principal place for young gays to have sex anymore, but it is still an important place for middle aged gays to develop sexual relationships.

**Key words:** Men who have sex with men, gay sauna, the use of condom, certification program

## Preface

Men who have sex with men (MSM) constitute the primary risk group for HIV infection globally. According to the statistics of WHO/UNAIDS, sexual activity is the main route of epidemic HIV infection worldwide[1], and the global HIV epidemiologic report shows that the number of people infected with HIV through MSM infection is continually increasing, including in developed countries such as the U.S.A, Canada, Australia and other developed countries, where MSM accounts for 40-70% of HIV infection. This phenomenon is gradually extending to underdeveloped countries, such as the Caribbean, Africa and Middle East, where transmission occurs mainly because anal copulation without condom is highly contagious and the higher density of infection in MSM's social networks[2]. Serologic Testing Algorithm for Recent Human Immunodeficiency Virus Seroconversion (STARHS) finds that MSM accounts for more than 50% of recent HIV infections[3-5]. According to the data from Taiwan Centers for Disease Control (TCDC), MSM accounted for 45.05% of the HIV/AIDS population in Taiwan by the end of 2012[6]. Observing the number of new HIV notifications each year during the past fifteen years, the trend of HIV infection among MSM is gradually rising, while the average annual growth rate is about 14%. Based on the sustaining average annual growth rate of 14%, it is estimated that new infection cases among MSM will exceed one thousand people by the year 2015. Therefore, in addition to monitoring the prevalence of HIV infection among MSM, promoting intervention measures to reduce risk behavior is an urgent task to prevent a rapid spread of the AIDS virus.

Gay sauna is an important activity place for MSM. Both international and domestic research indicates that the prevalence of sexual transmitted diseases (STDs) among the consumers is extremely high[7-11]. Taiwan's yearly research focusing on MSM shows that the prevalence of HIV infection is about 5-10%[12-14]. However, most of the current research in Taiwan focusing on MSM comes from particular places, such as gay bars[14] and saunas[14,15]. The risk factors for STDs/HIV infection among MSM include past history of sexual disease, drinking before sexual activities, engaging in anal copulation, having no regular sex partner and infrequent use of condoms[14,16]. Oral copulation without condoms (194/334, 58.1%) among MSM is a common risk behavior during sexual activities in saunas, and the risk factors for HIV infection are TPHA positive, HCV antibody positive and have used emerging addictive drugs[14]. Taiwan gay saunas serial research has discovered that access points to condoms are different from actual places where sexual activities occur [17]. Consequently, nongovernmental organizations and owners of gay saunas have cooperated in implementing the structural intervention of "Get the condom, Use it completely", which has been proven effective in reducing the prevalence of HIV infection[16].

Our country amended the Enforcement Rules of the AIDS Prevention and Control Act, Article 9-1, in February 5th, 2005, which mandates that owners of gay saunas must offer condoms. The Taiwan Centers for Disease Control, MOHW, has also been supportive of nongovernmental organizations offering free screening and consulting services to customers

at saunas. It has also promoted the “friendly, healthy and safe business certification program” aiming at gay saunas since 2011, complemented by the “Sex Police: The surveillance and guidance of safe sexual activity” initiative to increase men’s willingness to use condoms and the rates of proper condom use throughout sex, with business owners actively encouraging or intervening in condom use throughout sex among their consumers[18]. Up to the end of 2012, there are twelve gay saunas in the five special municipalities and Taoyuan region, and this research focuses on these saunas, based on Moos’ conceptual framework[19]. Moos thinks that in the social atmosphere an environment creates, personal traits will interact with the environment to produce or decide the results of the personal behavior, which includes four aspects:(1) supra personal, which refers to the characteristics of the employers and customers in a business locations; (2) institutional context, which refers to the history, scale and number of staff of a business; (3) physical features, which refers to the size of areas/rooms, their allocation and design, the atmosphere, the lighting, the music and the display of related information (such as posters for AIDS related health promotion); and (4) policies and services, which refers to the rules set by the business (such as bans on alcohol and drugs), services provided (screening service for STDs/HIV), and relationships with other nongovernmental organizations, public safety authorities or public health agencies. The purposes of this research are: (1) to understand each sauna’s physical features and AIDS-related policies and services; (2) to understand the traits and risk behavior of customers; (3) to compare the effectiveness of the “friendly, healthy and safe business certification program” before and after in order to evaluate the policy and formulate health education strategies in the future.

### **Materials and Methods**

This research is based on Moos’ conceptual framework[19] with twelve gay saunas being visited by observers examining if there is a “friendly, healthy and safe business certificate” displayed at the door or reception desk and asking if the sauna operator knows about the “friendly, healthy and safe business certification program” as ways to differentiate between certified or uncertified businesses.

From September to the end of November in 2012, seven owners and employees of gay saunas and ten customers had been interviewed using the snowball sampling method following an initial introduction by nongovernmental organizations. The owners and employees had been interviewed for twenty to forty minutes in an one-to-one fashion, and they were asked how they decide where to provide condoms and lubricants at their business venue, whether they understand issues related to the certificated program, what their attitude and position are toward recreational drug use by customers, what their expectations are with respect to the certificate, etc. In addition, they were asked about their views on the “friendly, healthy and safe business certification program”. After all the information was collected, we performed a descriptive analysis of the data.

Also, anonymous self-report questionnaires in paper form were randomly distributed to customers of the saunas in order to collect information about their condom usage and their mode of sexual activity. After the completed questionnaires were received, charts and a database were built and statistical analysis was conducted using the software SPSS 17.0. First, we computed descriptive statistics, such as frequency, percentage, average and so on to describe population variables, and then we used inferential statistics, such as the Chi-square test to investigate whether the intervention measures of the “friendly, healthy and safe business certification program” have any influence over condom usage and the mode of sexual activity among gay patrons of saunas.

## Results

### **Sauna’s physical features and AIDS-related policies and services:**

All saunas provide condoms but in different supply conditions (Table 1). All of them have posters of AIDS/STD-related health education information. All the saunas provide condoms upon entry. Among the saunas, Taipei A sauna and Taichung B sauna have more locations to deposit condoms, and those locations are the nearest to places where sexual activities may occur so it takes the least time to get a new condom after the condom given at entry being got when entering the sauna. The space of saunas in Central and Southern Taiwan is larger than the ones in the north so most of the owners add new locations, besides the reception desk, on each floor to reduce the time needed to get a condom for the customers’ convenience.

Except Taipei A sauna, which considers condoms and lubricants as necessary business expenses, all interviewed owners hope that local health bureaus can take the initiative to provide condoms. Although local health bureaus do provide condoms, the quantity and time of supply are unstable. The owners in Taichung and Kaohsiung regions not only cooperate with local health bureaus but also cooperate with local nongovernmental organizations in the long term. Those local nongovernmental organizations help the owners distribute condoms in a stable fashion, and they regularly and proactively ask sauna operators whether their stock is sufficient, how their recent pattern of condom distribution has been, when would be the most convenient time to send condom resupply, etc. In addition, they utilize the time of anonymous screening service to understand the saunas and the pattern of condom usage among customers, and therefore the condition of condom deposits in these two regions is better compared to businesses in other counties.

Most of the owners cooperate with at least one local health bureau or NGO to provide free anonymous screening, but only employees in gay saunas in Taichung and Kaohsiung proactively provide screening or related information, while others provide the information only when customers take the initiative to inquire.

The interviewed owners and employees hope that the “friendly, healthy and safe business certification program” can be more differentiable, that the process of certification can be more transparent and standardized, and that government departments can give certified businesses priority when distributing free condoms. All interviewed customers cannot clearly identify changes that have taken place after a business has applied for the certificate.

**Table 1. Provision of condoms, lubricants and AIDS/STD screening service with related health education information at saunas**

Saunas (code)	Display of the friendly, healthy and safe business certificate	Condoms	Lubricants	AIDS/STD poster	AIDS/STD screening
A	at reception desk	obtain everywhere	obtain everywhere	yes	provided by health bureau and NGO
B	at the wall beside the door	obtain at reception desk	obtain at reception desk	yes	provided by health bureau
C	at the stairway	obtain at reception desk	obtain at reception desk	yes	provided by health bureau
D	at the handle beside the door	obtain at reception desk	obtain at reception desk	yes	provided by health bureau and NGO
E	no display	obtain at reception desk	obtain at reception desk	yes	No
F	at the handle beside the door	dedicated location	dedicated location	yes	provided by health bureau and NGO
G	at the handle beside the door	dedicated location	dedicated location	yes	provided by health bureau and NGO
H	no display	vending machine	no	yes	provided by health bureau
I	no display	obtain at reception desk	no	yes	provided by health bureau
J	no display	obtain at reception desk, revolving door, and vending machine	no	yes	provided by health bureau and NGO
K	no display	obtain at reception desk	obtain at reception desk	yes	provided by health bureau
L	no display	obtain at reception desk	obtain at reception desk	yes	provided by health bureau

### The traits and risk behavior of customers in saunas

From September to November in 2012, 777 anonymous self-report questionnaires had been collected. There were 462 (59.5%) questionnaires from certified saunas and 315 (40.5%) questionnaires from uncertified saunas. The age, sexual history and other variables of the customers in the certified or uncertified saunas show no significant difference. The age of the customers range from 17 to 71 years, with the average age being 34.35 years and the median being 34.80. The most common relationship status of the customers is without regular partners 328 (42.2%). (Table 2)

**Table 2. Comparison of socio-demographic characteristics of customers of certificated and uncertified saunas**

Variables	Certified n(%) 462 (59.5)	Uncertified n(%) 315 (40.5)	Total n(%) 777 (100)	P value
<b>Education level</b>				<b>0.927</b>
Junior high school	20(4.3)	15(4.8)	35(45.5)	
Senior high school or vocational high school (specialized)	97(21.0)	62(19.7)	159(20.5)	
College or college of technology	258(55.8)	174(55.2)	432(55.6)	
Graduate school or above	87(18.8)	64(20.3)	151(19.4)	
<b>Sex partners in the past six months</b>				<b>0.785</b>
Male	389(84.2)	265(84.1)	654(84.2)	
Female	6(1.3)	6(1.9)	12(1.5)	
Male and female	67(14.5)	44(14.0)	111(14.3)	
<b>Relationship status</b>				<b>0.511</b>
Without regular partners	203(43.9)	125(39.7)	328(42.2)	
Married	113(24.5)	89(28.3)	202(26.0)	
With regular girlfriend	5(1.1)	2(0.6)	7(0.9)	
With regular boyfriend	141(30.5)	99(31.4)	240(30.9)	

### Self-reported sexual health, STD history, AIDS screening and recreational drug use in the past 6 months:

The sexual health condition during the past six months, STD history and other characteristics of the customers do not differ significantly between certified and uncertified saunas (Table 3). There were 68 people(8.8%) who haven't received AIDS screening and 709 people(91.2%) who have received the screening, with the average month since the last screening being 6.51 months. One hundred customers(12.9%) said that they have had uncomfortable experiences in their genital organs, and among them, 42 people had the most common injuries such as blisters, skin lesion and ulceration. There are 100 people who have

been diagnosed with gonorrhea, which accounts for the most common STD, and 22 people diagnosed with syphilis, which accounts for the second most common disease. The observers entered the saunas at off-peak time and asked the reception whether there are bans on taking illegal substances (MDMA). All answers were that the sauna forbids the use of illegal substances. In addition, some saunas post related warnings at a visible place at the reception, and some emphasize the bans on taking illegal drugs on their website. However, the self-reported experiences of taking illegal drugs of the surveyed customers indicate that there are 332 people who took Ecstasy and 154 people who took Ketamine, which constitute the two most consumed drugs (Table 3). In regards to the use of recreational drugs, there is no significant difference between certified and uncertified saunas.

**Table 3. Self-reports from customers of gay saunas about screening uptake and recreational drug use**

Variables	Certified n(%) 462 (59.5)	Uncertified n(%) 315 (40.5)	Total n(%) 777 (100)	P value
<b>Experience of voiding difficulties, dysuria, pus in urethra and blisters, skin lesion and ulceration in genital organs in the past six months</b>				<b>0.553</b>
No	409(88.5)	268(85.1)	677(87.1)	
Yes	53(11.5)	47(14.9)	100(12.9)	
<b>AIDS screening uptake</b>				
No	41(8.9)	27(8.6)	68(8.8)	
Yes	421(91.1)	288(91.4)	709(91.2)	
<b>Past diagnosis of STD by doctors</b>				<b>0.890</b>
No	386(83.5)	262(83.2)	648(83.4)	
Yes	76(16.5)	53(16.8)	129(16.6)	
Syphilis	15	7	22	
Gonorrhea	58	42	100	
Amoeba	6	4	10	
AIDS	10	8	18	
<b>Recreational drug use when in sauna</b>				<b>0.889</b>
No	259(56.1)	175(55.6)	434(55.9)	
Yes	203(43.9)	140(44.4)	343(44.1)	
Ecstasy	196	136	332	
Ketamine	91	63	154	
Amphetamine	2	1	3	
Marijuana	10	7	17	

**Condom use experience(Table 4):**

In regards to the locations to deposit condoms, it is easier to get the condoms at the reception, on the wall and at the entrance to the dark rooms in the certified stores. Taipei A sauna is the most convenient one because it deposits the condoms at the places where sexual activity easily occurs. For example, it provides condoms in dark rooms, at the entrance to the bedroom, or in a pop-up box hanging from the wall, and in addition, every room has lubricants. It lists replenishment of condoms and lubricants on the regular checking list for cleaning and resupplies them the soonest. In addition, it is the most convenient sauna for the consumers to obtain condoms and lubricants. The number of people who have oral copulation without condoms shows significant difference between the certified and uncertified saunas. The number of people with unprotected oral sex in the certified saunas is more than those in uncertified saunas.

**Table 4. Condom use experience of customers in gay saunas with and without the “friendly , healthy and safe business certificate”**

Variables	Certified n(%) 462 (59.5)	Uncertified n(%) 315 (40.5)	Total n (%) 777 (100)	P value
<b>Did you wear a condom when you go to the sauna today?</b>				<b>0.056</b>
No	336(72.7)	209(66.3)	545(70.1)	
Yes	126(27.3)	106(33.7.)	232(29.9)	
<b>Does the sauna provide condoms?</b>				<b>0.240</b>
No	23(5.0)	22(7.0)	45(5.8)	
Yes	439(95.0)	293(93.0)	732(94.2)	
<b>Where can you get condoms?</b>				<b>&lt;0.001</b>
Reception	329	181	510	
Shower room	14	10	24	
Bed room	244	93	244	
Lobby	335	219	554	
Pop-up box hanging on the wall	51	1	52	
Entrance to the dark rooms	115	0	115	
Others	23	16	39	
<b>How many people did you have oral sex without condoms during the most recent sauna visit? (the average)</b>	4.14	3.13		<b>&lt;0.001</b>
<b>How many people did you have anal sex without condoms during the most recent sauna visit? (the average)</b>	1.32	1.57		<b>0.228</b>



## Discussion

The average age for the customers in twelve saunas is 34.35 years old. The consumers under 20 years old only account for 4 %, and there are 259(33.3%) people who are between 21-29 years old. The results show that sauna is no longer the place for young gays to have sex, but it is still an important place for middle aged gays to develop sexual relationships. Teenagers and party drug users seldom choose saunas as the place for sexual activity. When implementing the certification program, eight hosts of home parties express their willingness to apply for the “friendly, healthy and safe business certificate,” which will make their parties more attractive and allow the customers to have more fun and feel at ease.

This investigation finds that there are only 68(8.8%) people who haven't had AIDS screening, which is much fewer than before. [14, 17]Gonorrhea accounts for the most common STD being diagnosed, but its symptoms and infection routes still remain unclear. Most of the patients buy the drugs in the pharmacy themselves and never go to the special clinic for diagnosis or stop the treatment once the symptoms have been relieved. This phenomenon can be a reference for designing future health education and promotion programs.

As many nongovernmental organizations have received long term support from TCDC to enter gay saunas to provide free screening and consulting services, many saunas have actively participated in AIDS prevention so there is no significant difference between certified and uncertified saunas. However, when comparing two kinds of saunas, there are more diverse places to obtain condoms in the certified saunas with the “friendly, healthy and safe business certificate” than in the uncertified ones, it indicating that the “friendly, healthy and safe business certificate” still has certain protection and effectiveness for customers' health.

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