For Immediate Release

MCHD dating app partnership successful in publicizing syphilis outbreak

MORGANTOWN, WV (Nov. 27, 2019) — When Monongalia County Health Department teamed up with Grindr, a dating app geared toward the LBGTQ+ community, County Health Officer Dr. Lee B. Smith had no idea how many people might be educated about Monongalia County’s syphilis outbreak through this partnership.

It all started earlier this year, when Dr. Smith learned through a West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources public health disease investigator that some people diagnosed with syphilis in Morgantown had anonymous sexual encounters thanks to meeting partners through dating apps.

“So I thought, ‘If dating apps are part of the problem, couldn’t they also be part of a solution?’” Dr. Smith said.

MCHD contacted several dating apps; only Grindr agreed to work with the health department free of cost to alert their customers to this health concern. The result was a message that was delivered to a very targeted audience, the exact one for whom the information was relevant.

A public service announcement went live on April 24, 2019 to anyone who opened the Grindr app within a 50-mile radius of Morgantown. Initial interest exceeded what Dr. Smith had anticipated.

In the first nine hours, 5,000 unique individuals saw the message. The PSA ran weekly for the first month, and the tally after that period of time was 21,933 unique individuals altogether who had seen the message.
Also, nearly 10 percent of them clicked through to get more information on a newly created web page that highlighted MCHD Clinical Services’ anonymous free testing and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases.

“We were told that was an impressive click-through rate,” Dr. Smith said.

By the end of October, more than 70,000 unique individuals had seen the message, according to data provided by Emmett Patterson, global health projects manager for Grindr for Equality, Grindr’s social justice component.

A poster created by Dr. Smith and Mary Wade Triplett, MCHD’s public information officer, and displayed in September at the annual conference of the West Virginia Public Health Association at Canaan Valley Resort & Conference Center, brought this project to the attention of the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), who attended the conference.

As a result, Dr. Smith was asked to recount the story in a blog and in a podcast, both posted for members of NACCHO, which includes 2,800 health departments across the nation. Using social media and other technology to educate specific populations has piqued the interest not only of public health officials but also a few national media outlets.

The idea to ask a dating app to partner with MCHD to display a public service announcement goes back about a decade, when Dr. Smith was attending a global health conference in Washington, D.C.

One speaker discussed how providers in sub-Saharan Africa had negotiated with phone companies that offer services in that area to use 2% of their airtime to run public health messaging regarding HIV/AIDS.

That idea remained with Dr. Smith until he had a chance to apply it to the syphilis outbreak last spring that has been mostly occurring among the population of men who have sex with men (MSM).

In addition to the analysis provided by Grindr, anecdotal evidence of this partnership’s success has included not only patients who mentioned seeing this PSA as the reason they got tested at MCHD, but also some stories from outside Monongalia County, but still inside the 50-mile radius.

For instance, one man in another county told a public health investigator that he had no syphilis symptoms, but decided to get tested after seeing the PSA. As a result, he learned he had contracted syphilis, which was in its early stages and easy to treat and cure with antibiotics.
Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection that can cause serious health problems if left untreated, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (cdc.gov). If left untreated, syphilis has three stages, with different signs and symptoms in each stage. It typically begins with a painless, open sore at the original site of infection, which may or may not be noticeable to the infected person.

If syphilis is not treated quickly with antibiotics, secondary syphilis can include a skin rash, swollen lymph nodes and fever. During the latent, or tertiary stage, there are no signs or symptoms, but the disease can damage internal organs and may eventually lead to death.

Nationally, syphilis rates have risen 75 percent in four years, according to the CDC. Other STDs are also on the rise, including gonorrhea, which has risen 67 percent overall and nearly doubled among men. And chlamydia remains the most common condition reported to the CDC, with more than 1.7 million cases diagnosed in 2017; 45 percent of those cases were among females ages 15 to 24.

Precautions should be taken to avoid getting syphilis and other STDs. These include limiting and preferably knowing your sexual partners, using condoms correctly for every sexual encounter and getting tested for STDs. All sexually active people should be tested at least once; people who engage in high-risk behaviors should be tested at least every six months.

After the success of the MCHD/Grindr partnership, Dr. Smith believes this type of PSA may be used effectively to publicize and educate people regarding other important public health information.

“It would be nice if legislators could get on board so that we could get phone companies to devote a small percentage of their airtime to public health messaging,” Dr. Smith said. “That could have a very positive impact on people’s lives, not just locally but regionally and nationally as well.”

To make an appointment for free and anonymous STD testing and/or treatment at MCHD Clinical Services, call 304-598-5119. To find out more about syphilis, check out monchd.org/syphilis.html

To read Dr. Smith’s blog and hear the podcast, follow this link: naccho.org/programs/community-health/global-to-local-public-health-exchange#resources

To see the poster created about the partnership, go to: monchd.org/posters.html
Check out monchd.org and follow us on Facebook and Twitter @WVMCHD and on Instagram at #wvmchd for up-to-date information on health and wellness in the community.

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