

'All over Vauxhall they are dying'

The hedonism of London's gay community has taken a self-destructive turn, with hardcore drug use and unsafe sex leading to levels of death and disease unseen since the '80s. Worse still, no one is talking about it. **Paul Burston** reports on the biggest threat to the scene in 20 years. Illustration **Barry Falls**

Something scary is happening on the gay scene. Doctors know it. Club promoters know it. Clubbers know it, too. But nobody is talking about it, at least not openly. Twenty-five years after Aids was first identified, much has changed in the fight against the disease. A generation has grown up with the message that safer sex saves lives. So why are new infection rates so alarmingly high? And why do some gay men seem so hell-bent on destroying themselves? On Friday, the day before World Aids Day, the Royal Vauxhall Tavern is hosting a night called 'The Biggest Suicide Cult in History'. Strong words, and no less than you'd expect from the man responsible, performance artist David Hoyle. But the flyer goes even further. 'All over Vauxhall they are fucking without condoms', it reads. 'All over Vauxhall they are dancing till Tuesday morning. All over Vauxhall they are taking G, K, C, V and E [that's GHB, ketamine, cocaine, Viagra and ecstasy]. All over Vauxhall they are dying.'

'I truly believe that a lot of gay men would prefer to be dead,' says Hoyle. 'They clearly have deep-seated self-esteem issues and they go out seeking oblivion because, deep down, they don't believe their lives are worth living.' Hoyle is an outspoken critic of the commercial gay scene, and his words are clearly designed to provoke a reaction. But you don't have to look too far on the scene to find people behaving in a manner you might describe as 'self-destructive'. In the past eight years, the number of gay men with HIV in the UK has almost doubled. Partly this is due to an increase in the numbers coming forward for testing since the advent of lifesaving combination therapy. But partly it's due to a rise in unsafe sex or 'barebacking'. Dr Sean Cummings of Freedomhealth is a leading expert on gay male sexual health, and has warned for years of a second epidemic. Today he confirms that sexual health clinics 'have reached crisis point with rocketing rates of new STD diagnoses'. And where there's syphilis and gonorrhoea, HIV often follows.

'I get offered a lot of unsafe sex,' says Simon Casson, promoter of Duckie. 'I'm completely open about my HIV positive status, and I meet a lot of men who want me to fuck them without condoms. I used to go to gay sex clubs and saunas and there was always a lot of unsafe sex. People in those environments tend to be off their faces on drink and drugs. Why else would a gay sauna in Vauxhall be open for 24 hours, unless people were on drugs? I think there is a signifi-

cant constituency of gay men in London who use a lot of drugs and who are into unsafe sex. It's actually not that socially taboo. It's quite accepted. Just look at all the men advertising for bareback sex on Gaydar.' Alternatively, walk into any gay sex shop and the evidence is all around you. Bareback porn is outselling all other forms of gay adult entertainment. And I don't mean the 'pre-condom classics' made in the days before Aids and reissued by studios like Falcon. I mean films produced now, often in the UK. For years, the focus was on eroticising safer sex. Now it seems the reverse is true. Barebacking is portrayed as just another gay lifestyle choice, like living in a loft-style apartment or shopping at IKEA. Surely this must be having some effect on people's behaviour? As one gay porn producer wrote in a letter to the gay weekly *Boyz* recently:

A fatalistic few regard contracting HIV as a stepping stone towards having unprotected sex without consequences

'Porn does influence the kind of sex you have in reality, and bareback porn contradicts all the good work on HIV prevention being carried out by health promotion charities.'

Incidentally, it was in *Boyz* that I also read about the British gay porn actor who contracted HIV on a porn shoot. Which begs the question: how many gay men will get off watching the film in which he became infected? And how many will imitate that behaviour the next time they have sex? Several younger gay men I've spoken to in the past few months have argued that HIV is no big deal. They've heard about combination therapy, they've seen the ads with muscular men climbing mountains and they've jumped to the conclusion that life on anti-retrovirals is one long picnic. There are even the fatalistic few for whom contracting HIV is seen as some sort of rite of passage, or a stepping stone towards having lots of unprotected sex without having to think about the consequences.

Then of course there's the other kind of 'combination therapy', the cocktail of recreational drugs in common usage on the gay club scene. Ecstasy has given way to a combination of

drugs including coke, crystal meth and GHB. Clubs in Vauxhall even have 'recovery rooms' where people are left to 'sleep off' the effects of GHB - assuming of course that they don't develop breathing difficulties or have a cardiac arrest. Several prominent gay DJs have told me that 'GHB is killing the scene in Vauxhall'. It's killing the customers too. Earlier this year, there were reports of three deaths related to GHB at a well-known after-hours club. A barman I know has had seven friends die from GHB in the past 12 months. And to echo that famous Aids warning from the '80s, that's just the tip of the iceberg.

'GHB is a nasty, poisonous drug which is killing gay men on a regular basis', explains Dr Cummings. 'We've had a number of deaths of our patients resulting from use of the drug, either together with other drugs or alone. Death often occurs during or immediately post-sex and so the victims are found in humiliating circumstances. The scenarios are usually awfully upsetting for all concerned, especially partners and family members. Coroners will frequently be coy to spare the feelings of loved ones [by recording accidental death], but this has the inadvertent effect of concealing the likely real numbers. There is nothing glamorous about finding a young man dead in a harness, having fallen, struck his head, inhaled his own vomit and suffocated.'

'I understand the connection between sex and drugs,' confesses Casson. 'I experimented in that area for years, and I ended up HIV positive. Do I regret it? Yes I do. The gay world told me that it was okay to live like that. It's not. You can't go out clubbing for three or four days at a time, necking every drug you can lay your hands on, and not expect something bad to happen to you. Gay men tend to meet each other in drink-fuelled, drug-fuelled environments, and it's killing us. People are dying and there needs to be a wake-up call.'

In the early '80s, before Aids really hit Britain, there was a hi-NRG song played each week at Heaven called 'So Many Men (So Little Time)'. What few of us knew then was how prophetic these words would be. Twenty-five years on, how many men must contract HIV or die from drug overdoses before we change our behaviour? How long before we call time on a lifestyle that's killing us?

'The Biggest Suicide Cult in History' is at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern on Friday. See *Gay & Lesbian listings*.

