

# **Sex and drugs can take their toll: Understanding 'chemsex'**

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# Sex, drug and rock and roll..



- Marco is a 39 year old single gay HIV positive man working in London as a lawyer
- He has been attending sex parties for the last two years which he finds through the mobile app Grindr



- At the parties he uses a combination of methamphetamine, mephedrone and GHB/GBL. He often lets people inject him with methamphetamine, as he doesn't like injecting himself.
- He has unprotected sex with up to 10 people at the parties and is aware that he takes risks but says "I don't care when I'm high, only the next day".



- Over the last 3 months, Marco has been attending sex parties every weekend and admits that he has lost control.
- His work is suffering and he has been diagnosed with chlamydia and gonorrhea in the last month.
- He attends the clinic asking for help but acknowledges that he is ambivalent about change.



# “Chemsex”

- *Sex while under the influence of drugs taken before or during a sexual session*
- Definition **does not mention ‘harm’**
- From one person to group sex
- In UK strong association with MSM, but don’t forget heterosexuals (e.g. sex workers)
- Main drugs in the UK
  - **Methamphetamine**
  - **GHB/GBL**
  - **Mephedrone**
  - **Other parts of EU- ketamine**

# The drugs

# GHB/GBL

- Sedative/depressant
- Clear colourless, odourless liquid. Diluted in beverage
- Causes euphoria, disinhibition, muscle relaxation, sedation, coma
- Narrow dose range between desired effects and overdose ( a few mls)
- Severe dependence & withdrawals
- Interactions-alcohol, ART





# Methamphetamine

- Stimulant
- 'Tina' 'Crystal'
- White or colourless crystals
- Smoked, snorted, injected "slamming"
- Increased arousal, disinhibition, insomnia
- Agitation, paranoia, psychosis
- MI, CVA, kidney damage, dependence



# Mephedrone

- Stimulant
- M-CAT, Meph
- Fine powder
- Snorted, swallowed (bombed), injected, rectally
- Increased libido, disinhibition.
- Agitation, paranoia
- Teeth grinding, erectile dysfunction, seizures, MI, CVA



# Other drugs

- Ketamine
- Cocaine
- MDMA
- Poppers
- Viagra
- Benzodiazepines
- (Alcohol)

# Drug risks

- **Overdose** – especially GHB and polydrug use
- **Injecting harms** – BBV including HIV and Hepatitis
- **Dependence** –GHB, methamphetamine, mephedrone
- Disinhibition leading to **unsafe sexual practices**

**The sex**

# Social media and the internet

- Geo-spatial networking apps
- Terminology
  - BB
  - Chems
  - Chill
  - FF
  - G
  - PnP
  - Slamming
  - T



# Venues

- Sex on premises venues  
– sauna, clubs
- Chillouts (private accommodation)



# Sexual risks

- **Risk factors**
  - Multiple partners
  - Group sex
  - Traumatic/extreme sexual practices
  - Condomless sex
  - Injecting and sharing equipment
- **Harms**
  - STI- syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia, shigella
  - Hepatitis, HIV
  - Sexual assault



# Our experience in London

- MSM
  - **75%** new to treatment
  - **50%** had injected at least once, a **third** in four week before attending
  - **50%** of current injectors had **shared** injecting equipment
  - **60%** HIV positive
  - **75%** used drug in a sexual context



# Who engages in 'chemsex' and how common is it?

- **Prevalence unclear.** Estimates vary greatly across studies
- Some clear messages
  - Chemsex participants
    - Expect drugs to **enhance sexual encounter**
    - More likely to engage in **condomless intercourse**
    - More likely to engage in **group sex**
    - More likely to have **STI** in last 12 months
  - **HIV positive** people more likely to engage in chemsex

# Marco

- Marco starts attending the clinic weekly.
- He completes consumption diaries and his keyworker uses a cognitive-behavioural approach. There is no evidence of physiological dependence on any drugs
- He last engaged in “sober sex” a decade ago and explains that using drugs helps him forget “the shame” he feels having sex.
- Marco grew up in a strongly homophobic culture and was rejected by his family when he told them he was gay. Since then he has had almost no contact.

- The team use the model of “**internalised homophobia**” and refer Marco to psychosexual counselling.
- They also work with Marco to reduce his risk. Another sexual health screen is offered along with advice on safer sexual practices.
- He is vaccinated for Hepatitis B
- Marco agrees to start smoking rather than injecting methamphetamine and plans to “party less”.

# What drug services should do?

- Stigma/cultural competence
- Screening
  - Have you used drugs in last month?
  - Which ones?
  - In what context?
  - Do you inject, share equipment?
  - Are you worried?
  - What is your goal?
  - When did you last have a sexual health screen?
  - When did you last have sober sex?



# Treating chemsex

- **Abstinence** from drugs **AND** sex usually needed for severely dependent people
- But abstinence **not everyone's goal.**
- **Harm reduction** - drug and sexual harms
- Addiction treatment should include MI, RP, CBT, 12 steps (CMA), detox and rehab (esp GHB)
- But also
  - **Psychosexual therapy**
  - **Use of apps/internet**

# Engagement

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sH00iz9zSDI&feature=youtu.be>

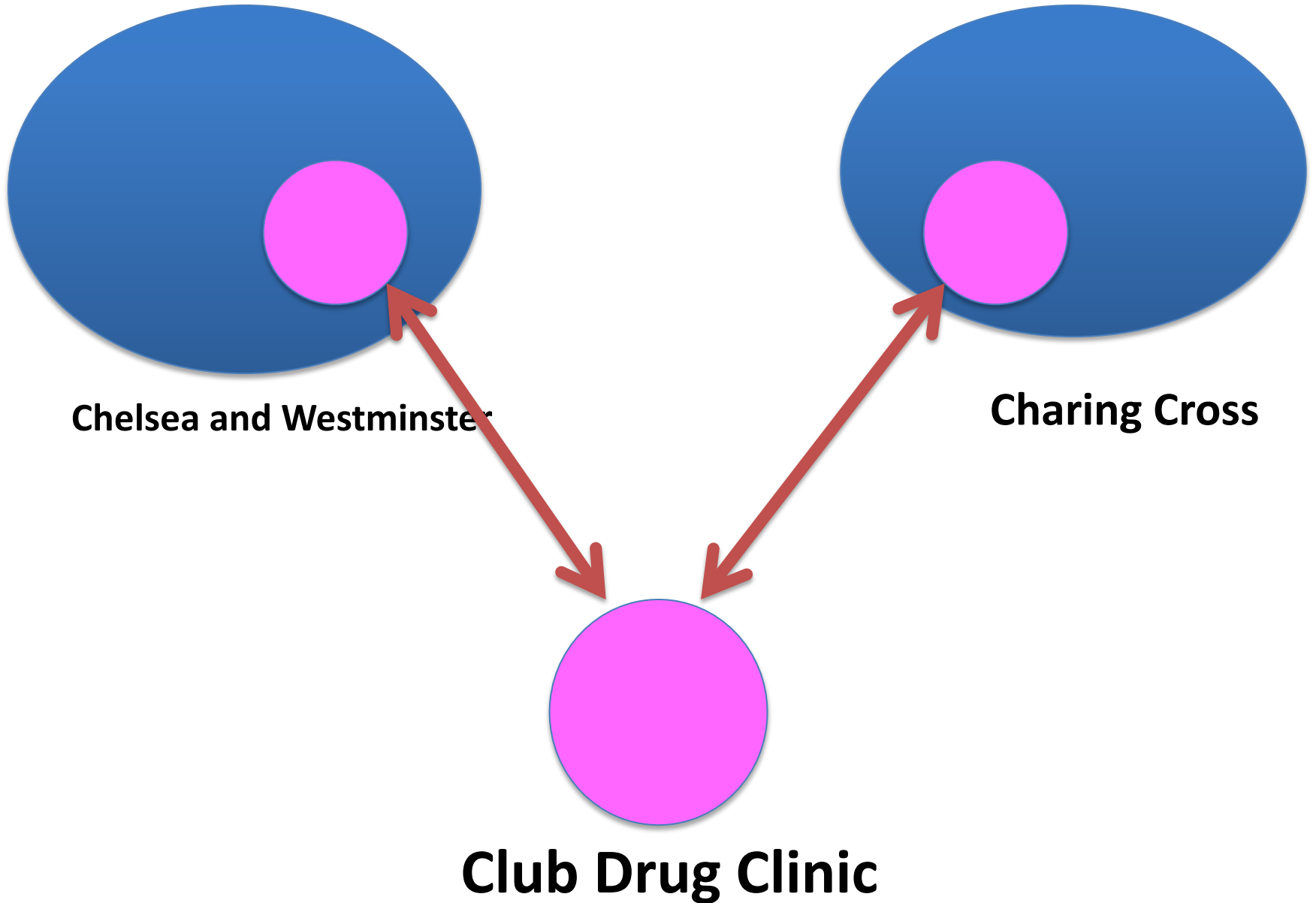
# CNWL and Antidote/London Friend

antidote  
**@friend**  
LGBT drug and alcohol support





# Sexual health satellite clinics



# Chemsex

## what have we learnt do far?

- **Emerging problem** which is still poorly understood
- Need to work **across traditional boundaries**
- **New learning** for both **drug** and **sexual health** services
- **Cultural competence** is key to engagement
- Value of a **centre of excellence** to develop knowledge
- **Disseminate** the learning

# Summary

## Prevalence of HIV risk-related drug use and sexual activity among men who have sex with men attending a specialist UK club drug clinic

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Central and North West London **NHS**  
NHS Foundation Trust

# OVERDONE IT?

The **CNWL Club Drug Clinic** provides support for people who have begun to experience problems with their use of club drugs.

**CNWL  
CLUB  
DRUG  
CLINIC**

Wellbeing for life

The poster features a dark blue background with a photograph of a crowd at a club, with many hands raised in the air. The text is overlaid on this image. At the bottom, there are four small white icons: a heart, a grid, a flower, and a gear.