

Honesty 'is best HIV policy' for gay couples

By KATHARINE CHILD

● If men in same-sex relationships could talk more honestly about additional sexual partners, they would be less at risk of contracting HIV, a new Southern Africa study reveals.

This is one conclusion from the Human Sciences Research Council's study.

South African researchers, with the support of two US universities, the Gay and Lesbian Network and Namibian NGO Positive Vibes, conducted the first study on male gay couples in the region.

Study project leader Zaynab Essack said in the survey of 220 people, 78% of men reported being in monogamous unions.

She said it was known overseas that gay men often had "explicit" agreements about having outside partners and deciding how to use protection with additional partners.

This lowers their risk of HIV.

Essack said: "Having a conversation means we are both in agreement and we know whether we are protected or not."

But the study found that, in South Africa and Namibia, when there was an explicit agreement between partners about having an extra person on the side, the extra partners were only allowed to be a woman.

Partners interviewed separately sometimes gave different answers on whether the couple was monogamous or not.

Essack said couples needed to be able to talk openly about possible additional sexual partners. "Developing the skill for open communication can enhance relationships, trust and honesty."

There is no national figure of HIV rates in gay and bisexual men, but small studies show a prevalence of between 10% to 50% of all gay men. The prevalence of HIV among South Africans aged 15 to 49 is 17%.

Only a third of those surveyed knew the preventative drug Truvada reduced the risk of contracting HIV by at least 90% if taken daily. Only 2% used it.