

BLQ Checkpoint: characteristics of users in the first 30 months of activity

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Introduction

- CHECKPOINTS are community centres for gay men and other men who have sex with men (MSM), where rapid tests (saliva or capillary blood sampling) for HIV and other STI are offered.
- They address the need to bring the STI tests outside hospital environment, making them more accessible to MSMs; at Checkpoints, users can receive peer counselling, support and information.
- Checkpoints have already been established in other European cities such as Barcelona, Lisbon, Athens, Belgrade, etc.



- The BLQ Checkpoint, run by Plus Onlus, is the first of its kind in Italy. It started its activity on 15 September, 2015.
- The BLQ Checkpoint was opened by Plus onlus, Italian network of LGBT people living with HIV, thanks to a collaboration with the municipality of Bologna and the local health authorities, in collaboration with Regione Emilia Romagna.
- It offers Rapid HIV test (Alere Determine™ HIV-1/2 Ag/Ab Combo - capillary blood sampling collected by a nurse) and Rapid HCV test (OraQuick® HCV Rapid Antibody Test – saliva collected by a nurse; these tests are done within the Easy-HCV Plus Project).
- From April to July 2017, hepatitis A vaccination was also provided to MSM users by a doctor, in collaboration with local health authorities.
- All tests and services are free, anonymous, confidential: Tests results are available in 20 minutes. Pre- and post-test peer counselling is provided.

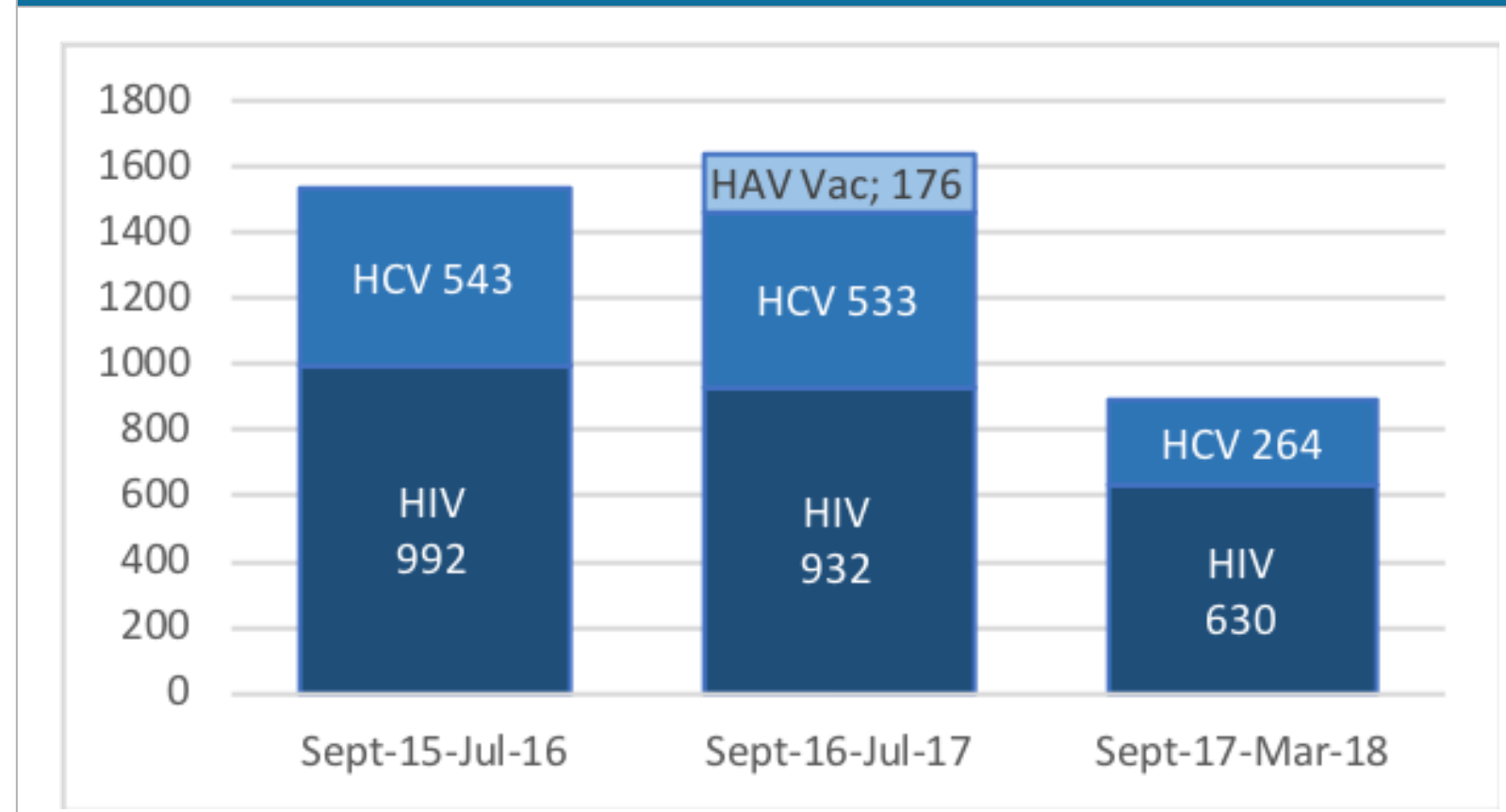
Methods

- We here present the characteristics of users accessing BLQ Checkpoint from 15 Sept 2015 to 15 March 2018.
- The BLQ Checkpoint is open two days per week, Tuesdays and Thursdays, from 6 PM to 9 PM, thanks to the activity of Plus' volunteers. It is also open during special circumstances (European Testing Week, St. Valentine's Day, AIDS Day, etc.). It closed for season holidays in August.
- During its first 30 months of activity, the BLQ Checkpoint was open for 245 days and more than 750 hours overall.

Results: total accesses

- In 30 months, 2,239 single users accessed the BLQ Checkpoint and 249 visits with repeating users were performed in this period.
- A total number of 2,488 accesses were registered (median 3.24 accesses per opening hour or 10 accesses per day).
- Overall, 2,554 HIV tests and 1340 HCV tests were performed (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Type of test performed



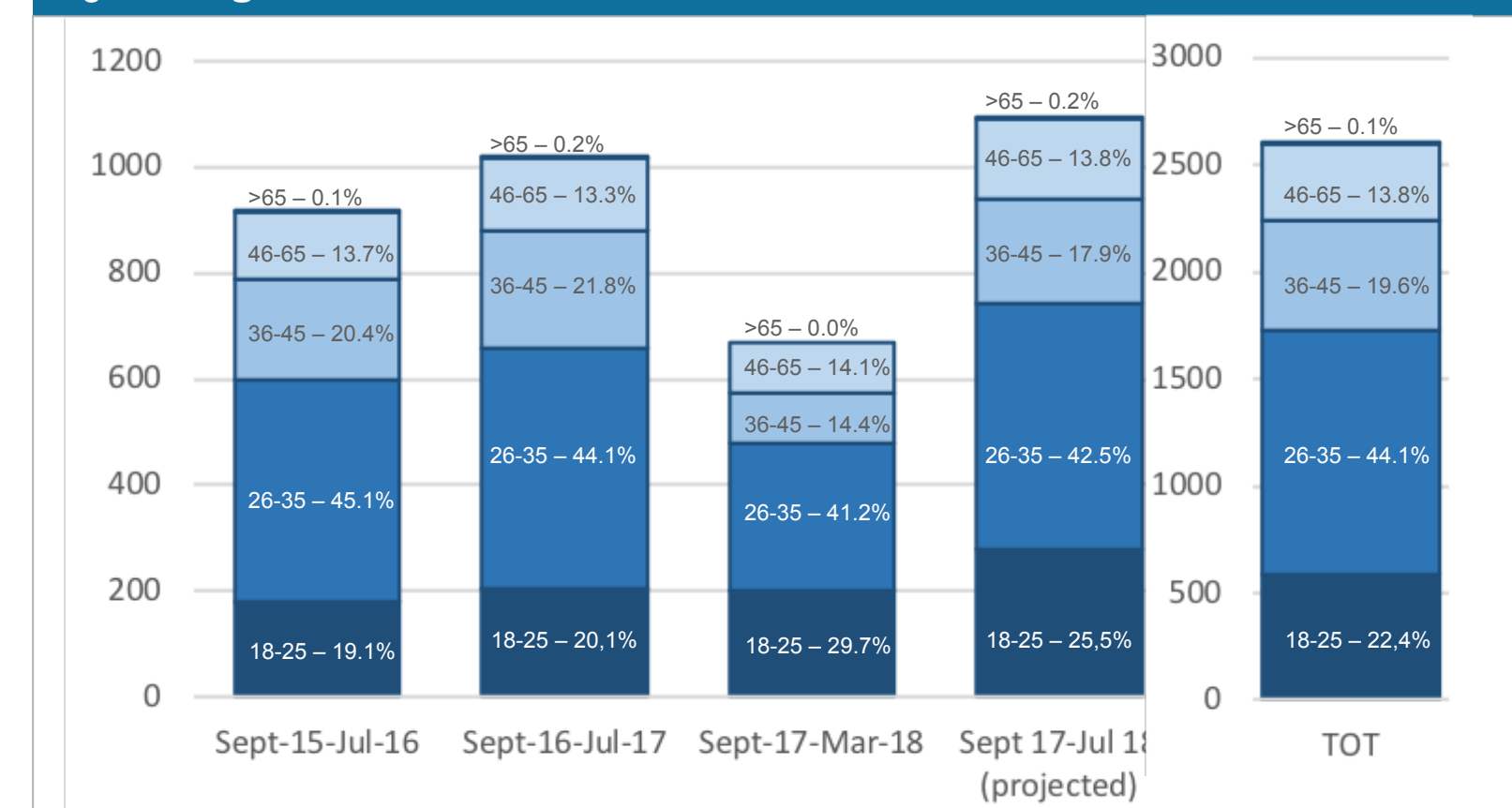
Results: Users characteristics

Demographics

Of the 2,239 users, 75.6% were male, 24.3% female, 3 transgender.

The most represented age group was 26-35 (44.1%), followed by 18-25 (22.4%), and 36-45 (19.6%); 13.8% of the users were older than 46 with 3 users older than 66. The proportion of younger users is increasing, from 19.1% of users aged 18-25 from Sept. 2015 to July 2016, to 20.1% from Sept. 2016 to July 2017 and 29.7% from Sept 2017 to March 2018 (see Figure 2).

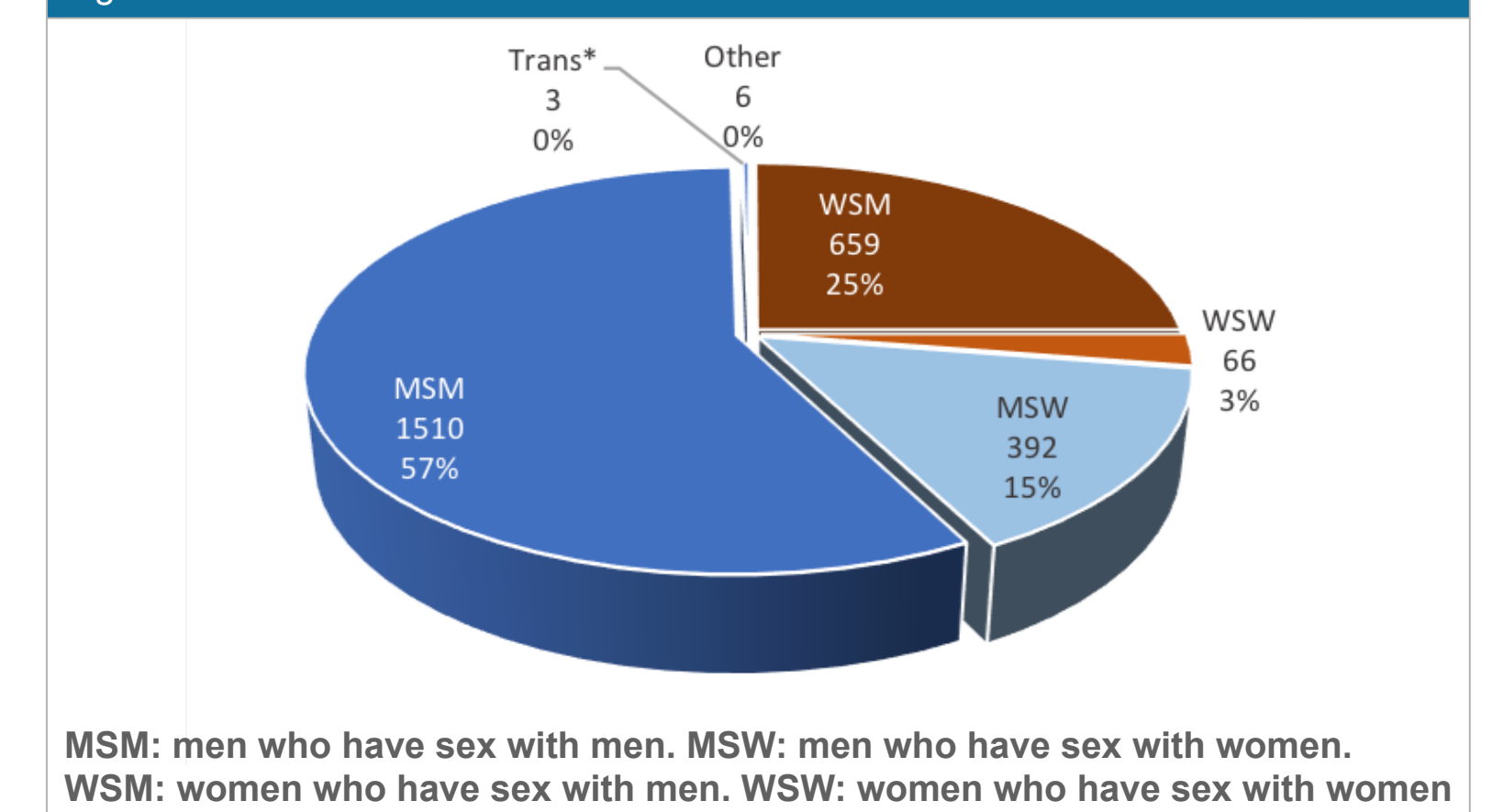
Figure 2 Age of users



Sexual orientation

Men who have sex with men (MSM) represent 57.3% of the users, while 40.0% were heterosexual and 2.5% female who have sex with female (FSF) (See Figure 3).

Figure 3 Sexual orientation of users



Tests results

Out of the 2,554 HIV tests performed, 11 gave a reactive result. All users with reactive results were MSM. All were confirmed by test ELISA at the hospital and were linked to care.



Conclusion

- The BLQ Checkpoint was very well received by the users: almost all of them welcomed the initiative and considered it as an important tool to improve access to HIV and HCV testing.
- Users of the BLQ Checkpoint increasingly represent a target group for HIV and other STIs prevention and testing strategies, including those who might be interested in using PrEP.
- Future steps include finding a way to keep it open more days per week and implementing strategies to focus more efficiently on the sub-groups of the gay community at higher risk for HIV and hepatitis.