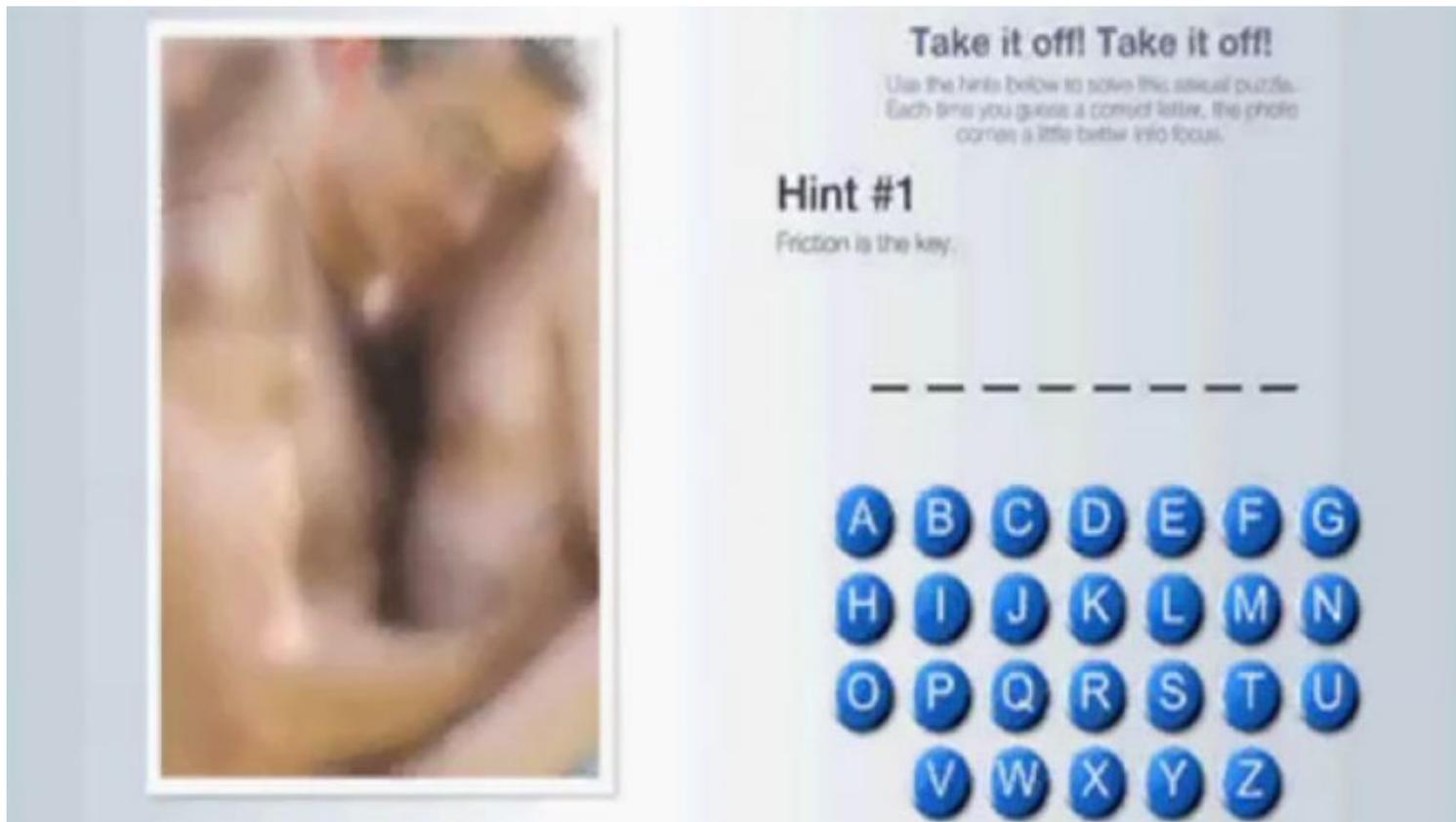


NIH under fire for grants toward creation of homoerotic website



Shown here is an image from the Sexpulse website. Men's Internet Study for HIV Prevention

The National Institutes of Health has spent millions of dollars over the past decade to fund the construction of an HIV-prevention website that, among other sexually explicit features, includes a graphic image of homosexual sex and a Space Invaders-style interactive game that uses a penis-shaped blaster to shoot down gay epithets.

The grant money went to a team of researchers at the University of Minnesota that created a site called Sexpulse. The goal was to draw in what are termed MISM -- or "men who use the Internet to seek sex with men" -- in order to educate them and ultimately reduce their risk of contracting HIV.

But the site used unorthodox methods to get subjects' attention and keep them interested. The site includes pornographic images of homosexual sex as well as naked and

scantily clad men. It includes several risqué interactive features, like the Space Invaders-style arcade game.

The conservative Traditional Values Coalition, which flagged the government-backed research and described it as "gay porn," complains the website and studies are a multi-million-dollar waste.

"We can't spend money on this. America is broke," coalition President Andrea Lafferty said. "People are losing their homes, they're losing their jobs ... and what we're doing is we're funding year after year these cockamamie grants by people at NIH."

NIH records show the government started awarding grants to the Minnesota team beginning in 2001, renewing them almost every year since then. The 2012 grant was valued at more than \$680,000; in total, NIH has awarded more than \$5 million to the team. The researchers started developing the Sexpulse site in 2005 and continue to work on the project -- the project leader told FoxNews.com that total funding through 2015 is expected to top \$7 million.

The values coalition, which frequently complains about NIH spending, is drawing attention to the Sexpulse grants as Congress renews a heated debate over government waste in the wake of the General Services Administration scandal. In that case, an internal report found the agency spent more than \$820,000 on a Las Vegas retreat.

"This is a lot more money," Lafferty noted of the NIH funding.

The National Institute of Mental Health defended the research in a statement to FoxNews.com, citing the relatively high infection rates of HIV among the target audience.

"HIV prevention is an urgent priority in the fight against HIV / AIDS. The long-term objective of this research is to develop Internet-based interventions to lower sexual risk behavior among men who have sex with men (MSM)," the statement said. "MSM are the largest population infected with HIV in the United States -- accounting for approximately half (48 percent) the people living with HIV in the United States, and more than half of new HIV infections (61 percent) each year. The intervention developed by this research team has already yielded positive results by demonstrating a 20 percent reduc-

tion in risk behavior in this population."

Researchers who received the grants recruited thousands of test subjects through Gay.com. According to one publication on their experiment, they found "near universal acceptability for highly sexually explicit education."

The idea was to create a different kind of sexual health education website -- one that would lure in users and keep them on the site by appealing to their sexual appetites, and perhaps a sense of erotic whimsy.

One interactive feature was an "animated penis icon," which would bounce across the screen and offer users "amusing rewards" -- according to the narrator in one university video. Those rewards could come in the form of brief animations. One of them showed an animation of a man's penis, with pieces of string tied around it.

"You're so hot, what's that string for?" a voice asks.

"To remind me to wear a condom," the other responds, while going on to explain the other strings are to remind him to pay rent and change the oil.

Other sections were more serious, like videos of men discussing their personal battles living with HIV.

Researchers hoped the bells and whistles would hook users so they would simultaneously absorb the site's sexual health messages -- and come away learning how to reduce their risk of STD exposure.

Lafferty's group downplayed the return on the investment.

A 2010 report on the research claimed to observe a 16 percent reduction in unprotected anal sex among test subjects after three months -- the report, though, claimed "no meaningful differences" were observed after a year. Another more recent report showed a 20 percent reduction after three months.

Project leader Simon Rosser, though, touted the research as one of the first studies to examine the correlation between "Internet use and HIV risk."

"Clearly, if we can design effective 21st century interventions online that lower the risk behavior of those at the heart of this epidemic, the hope is we can change the course of the epidemic both in the U.S. and globally. A key advantage of online interventions is that they can be delivered at minimal cost to millions," he said in an e-mail to FoxNews.com.

Rosser argued that the "potential economic savings to the taxpayer are considerable" if HIV risk can be reduced in this manner. He praised the "huge amount of work undertaken by an incredible team," and said the resulting studies have helped develop the science of "Internet-based HIV prevention."

The project was spotlighted in a Minneapolis Star Tribune article in 2008. "If this is successful, it is huge," Rosser told the newspaper. "We can flick a switch and make it available to every gay man in the world."

This isn't the first time the Traditional Values Coalition has complained about questionable behavioral research grants at NIH.

Last year, the organization cried foul over a government-backed study on the effect a gay man's penis size has on his sex life and general well-being.

The study reported, among its findings, that gay men with "below average penises" were more likely to assume a "bottom" sexual position, while those with "above average penises" were more likely to assume a "top" sexual position. Those with average penises identified themselves as "versatile" in the bedroom.

At the time, one of the researchers involved with the study said the NIH funding was only used to help "analyze and write up" data that had already been collected without the use of taxpayer funds.