Chapter 6

Harm Reduction

What is there that is not poison?
All things are poison and there is nothing that is not poison.
Solely the dose determines that a thing is not a poison.

—Paracelsus (1493–1541)1

In response to the excessive and self-destructive behavior of too many Circuiteers, there has been a strong movement within the community for harm reduction, strategies and programs to reduce health risks associated with intoxication and unsafe sex in the Circuit community.

The basic principles of harm reduction are as follows: drug addiction should be treated as an illness, not a crime. Attempts to ban recreational drugs and unsafe sex are counterproductive, as are campaigns that use shame to prevent drug use or unsafe sexual practices. Education is the most effective means for reducing overdoses, addiction, and STDs. The most effective educational programs directly target the community at risk, using strategies that appeal to its members.

Harm reduction in the Circuit is a coordinated effort. Artists and media experts have designed advertisements and brochures aimed at Circuiteers to educate them about various intoxicants and safer sex. MedEvent, a volunteer group of doctors, nurses, paramedics, and EMTs from all across the country, attends Circuit parties to help people with health issues. A continuous dialogue has been set up with event promoters and venue owners to address harm-reduction issues and strategies. There is even a listserv for professionals (partysafe@yahoogroups.com) to discuss issues pertaining to harm reduction.

1. Paracelsus (a.k.a. Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim) was a Medieval alchemist-physician who recognized two basic postulates of modern toxicology: poisons should be understood in chemical, not supernatural, terms; dosage, not substance, makes a poison (Lutz 82, Fenton 5).
Along with concerns about how participants behave, harm-reduction proponents see tolerance from police officers and city officials as crucial to the health and well-being of participants. The elimination of draconian law enforcement practices in the dance scene, coupled with promoters that give the community a good party in nice settings, appears to lower stress and reckless behavior. Consequently, problems with substance abuse tend to be reduced. Many harm-reduction advocates have also made common cause with the Drug Policy Alliance, an umbrella organization dedicated to the decriminalization of recreational drugs.

Some cities go out of their way making participants feel at home, with official welcome events and banners proclaiming the events in the streets. Montreal promotes its Black and Blue Ball as a citywide event in early October for Canadian Thanksgiving weekend, Palm Springs welcomes White Party attendees with open arms every spring, South Beach in Miami publicly salutes revelers in early March for the Winter Party, and again on the US Thanksgiving weekend for its own White Party. Official municipal-wide appreciation of Circuit events is a public expression of tolerance for Gay people and recognition of the revenue brought into the city every year. Compared to other large gatherings, such as sports events or musical concerts, Circuit participants are much easier to manage, in no small part due to the lack of violence and minimal destruction of property. Municipal recognition also subtly places Circuiters on notice that they are representatives of Gay culture, and that they should behave appropriately, at least when in public. This includes moderation in the use of intoxicants.

One notable trend in the United States, however, has been the reduction of awareness-oriented advertisements and material at the events. The Philadelphia Blue Ball 2005 did not display any guidelines describing the properties of party drugs and how to party safely. This is a significant change from Blue Ball 2001 in which posters throughout the venue and on bathroom stalls cautioned participants about the effects of certain substances. The reason for this silence is the notion commonly held by the U.S. government that there is no such thing as responsible drug use. Since America intensified its war on drugs, messages that openly advocate harm reduction rather than complete abstinence are seen as giving aid and comfort to the enemy. Canadian sensibilities on this point, however, are quite different. Advertising campaigns for harm reduction and responsible drug use continue in Toronto and Montreal.

The BBCM (Bad Boys Club Montreal) that produces Montreal’s Black and Blue has been at the forefront of harm reduction and a kinder, gentler Circuit. Toronto’s ACT (AIDS Committee of Toronto) likewise is
proactive in providing information about drug use and harm reduction for Circuit events held in that city.

The last three sections of this chapter are examples of harm reduction in action. The first deals with MedEvent and its founder, Chris Mann, from Dallas (interview, June 2005). The second is Brazilian producer Ric Sena of NYC/Rio de Janeiro and how he promotes responsible behavior in his Alegria parties (interview, August 2007). The third is Bad Boys Club Montreal (BBCM), the group responsible for Black and Blue, and Montreal activist-artist Kat Coric (interview, November 2006).

**MedEvent**

Founded in 1998, MedEvent is a welcome presence on the dance floor. Equipped with folding lounge chairs, a sizeable medical kit, and an oxygen tank, the MedEvent staff sets up a “recovery room” near the dance floor and apart from the gaze of the curious.

The volunteers are easy to spot; they wear red shirts with the MedEvent logo. Dr. Mann described the symbols in the uniform:
The design of the shirts is deliberate in a couple of ways: (1) white on red or vice versa stands out even in a dark place for easy sighting. (2) The symbols used are a Swiss Cross (international medical symbol) centered inside an upside-down triangle that is easily recognized by Gays as a symbol of homosexuality, but not often by heterosexuals, in order to communicate the origin and intent of the medical group.

MedEvent staff members stand discreetly at the edge of the dance floor, ready to help anyone who looks as if there might be a health problem.

MedEvent volunteers are familiar with the Circuit scene. Many of them are themselves Circuiteers, and may be seen off-duty at events. Their familiarity includes medical knowledge based on lived experience about how to handle crises that are unique to the Circuit scene.

It is impossible to determine how many lives MedEvent has saved; before MedEvent, the Circuit was well on its way to self-destruction. A significant number of participants consistently behaved irresponsibly, especially with GHB and its comatose- and death-inducing properties. Occasionally, shortsighted party promoters would dump unconscious clientele out on the street in order to avoid calling ambulances.

The MedEvent crew changed the scene by putting the focus on compassion. Their discreet and nonjudgmental presence acts as a gentle reminder to both promoters and participants that there is more to the party than making a profit and getting cracked.

Dr. Mann is pleased with his organization. “The intended impact of MedEvent on the dance community has been achieved,” he said. “Most patrons now look after each other, even strangers, much more [than previously] and are not afraid to give and seek help from us to keep the whole environment safer and more positive for us all.”

Ric Sena and Alegria

“Show people respect,” said Ric Sena, “and they will respect you.” If the party is lackluster and attendees are treated like cattle, they will feel no responsibility to behave. They are more likely to, as Sena puts it, “do bad things.” He feels that people who are bored and treated poorly will do more drugs and do them irresponsibly, which leads to more overdoses and gives authorities reason to shut the party down.

Nobody wants to pay good money to dance in a dirty venue. “I’ve been to parties where I had to wade through trash,” Sena said. A dirty venue is a clear sign of disrespect for the crowd. It would be no surprise, then, for the crowd to behave trashy. In addition to providing beautiful

décor and plenty of gostosos (Brazilian Portuguese for hot men), workers keep the venue as clean as possible during the party.

Horror stories abound in New York City of rude bouncers searching every nook and cranny of a person’s body, confiscating all contraband materials, and then selling them back to attendees once they are inside the venue. Such tactics have not been shown to be successful in reducing overdoses. Sena realizes that personal searches are necessary but they need not be invasive. He insists that all of his workers, from door personnel to bartenders, be courteous and professional.

Sena’s parties can last for seventeen hours. Such a long event should logically be a recipe for statistically higher overdoses and ambulance runs. This does not, however, seem to be the case for Alegria.

Black and Blue and the Bad Boy Club Montréal

In October 2006, I went to Quebec’s big AIDS fundraiser, Black and Blue, to see for myself what the Bad Boy Club Montréal (BBCM) had created. The staff was professional and friendly. The party was visually stunning, sound and music were superb, and tickets were reasonably priced. Montreal is a joy to visit.

But life in Montreal is not always easy. Quebec is a province under pressure. Its French heritage is constantly barraged by the rest of English-speaking Canada and the gigantic monolingual presence of the United States. For the Black and Blue weekend, however, tensions
are relaxed. The city rolls out its best blue carpet for visitors from the United States, Europe, and the rest of Canada.

What really impressed me about Black and Blue is the emphasis on harm reduction. The Bad Boys Club Montréal that runs Black and Blue and other annual Circuit parties (Hot and Dry, Red Party, Bal des Boys, and Twist) coined the phrase “The Party Needs You” (in both English and French, of course: “Pour que le party soit réussi, on a besoin de toi!”). At the same time, personal responsibility is also highlighted, and the underlying message is this: the party needs you, so don’t endanger your own health or ruin things for the rest of us by behaving irresponsibly. Information is readily available about the effects of recreational drugs and possible complications that could result when partiers mix them with HIV medications.

The BBCM’s harm-reduction program includes a dance troupe with a strong spiritual ethos. Since the BBCM began in 1995, a group of volunteer performers came together to put on shows for events. These volunteers formed the BBCM Dancers, who dedicate their performances to the fight against AIDS, a disease that has claimed the lives of some of its members. Before every performance, they offer this prayer:

Nous
Hommes et femmes
Gai-straight-bi
Séropositifs et séronégatifs
Gens de tous les métiers
Sommes unis à la mémoire de ceux qui sont disparus
Et pour le courage de ceux qui poursuivent le combat
We
Men and Women
Gay, straight, bi
Seropositive and seronegative
From all walks of life
Join together to remember those who are gone
And to offer support to those who continue the fight

The BBCM Dancers are an integral part of the shows for which Black and Blue is renowned, both for their professionalism and the energy they bring to the event. If any group in the Circuit consistently represents fierceness, it would be the BBCM Dancers.

Kat Coric, a professional artist and harm-reduction activist, started out in the BBCM organization as a BBCM Dancer. A few years ago, she suggested that the organization do an annual art auction. The BBCM created a position for her; she developed the Health Education Campaign and founded the Black & Blue Annual Art Exhibition & Auction, the first of its kind within the Circuit. Coric mixes art, humor,
and health awareness to capture people’s attention with eye-catching posters and flyers promoting safer sex and partying.

I noticed posters during the B&B weekend informing people with AIDS that refrigerators were provided on the premises for medications, a service started by Coric. Since functions can go for six to ten hours, HIV+ participants can party with their friends as long as they wish without skipping their vital meds schedule.

A celebrated artist in Montreal and New York, Kat Coric often gears her talents toward harm prevention in the party scene. In 2000, she did two memorable posters about crystal meth with graphic artist Charles Henri. One was a picture of Tina Turner that said, “The Only Good Tina” and the other was a photo of a long-stem crystal glass with “Crystal Is Better at Tiffany’s.”

Although she is no longer on the BBCM staff, Coric supports the organization whole-heartedly. She continues to work with AIDS fundraisers and donate her art. In 2006, she volunteered once again to be a BBCM dancer for Black and Blue.
Commentary: Caroline Rousse

Montreal
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I’ve been working at BBCM since 1995 and am currently the BBCM Director of External Affairs. The fact that the event is more that just a party has kept me there. We work with an incredible team, and we know that we can make a difference.

Concerning harm reduction, I think it’s very important to still work hard and make sure that we do give out as much information as possible. I’ve witnessed awful things at some events (ours and others). I think that partying is a good thing (it’s essential), but it has to be done in a responsible way because it can easily get out of control and ruin your life if you overdo it.

The BBCM Foundation has been organizing parties for seventeen years. In the early days of the BBCM, the organizers realized that they should do some prevention. In the scene, not many people were doing anything while we witnessed all the problems linked to drug abuse. We thought it would be a good idea to organize a prevention campaign. We sat down with the doctors who handled our infirmary at our events, as they do research on recreational drugs and their effects, in order to produce a prevention booklet. Together, we pinned down the various drugs that we should talk about and wrote the booklet. We also decided to work on the production of posters to be put up at our events.

Not wanting to condemn or condone drug abuse, we wanted mostly to give our participants the information that they needed before they actually decide to take drugs. Our posters were humorous but gave out good information ... something that works! We got lots of good comments on them. The booklet was also printed in order to be given out at the events to all of our participants. The information got updated throughout the years. We did get requests from schools, other promoters and club owners to get some copies of our booklet. Most of the information can be found on our Web site: www.bbcm.org (in the “party safely” section). We even had requests from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to get our information, as they also organize symposiums on drugs and wanted to see the most updated information on recreational drugs.

Our goal is mostly to make sure that people take their responsibilities seriously and that if they choose to take drugs, they at least know the dangers and know what not to mix, for instance.

In a way, we feel that our government should definitely do more prevention. Most of the information that we have gathered should be given
to people before they actually show up at our events. This information should be available in high schools and also should be given to parents. We feel that people only talk about drugs to condemn their use or to say how many dealers were arrested, but we should be more open to discuss the real picture: who takes drugs, why, how can we talk about it, etc.