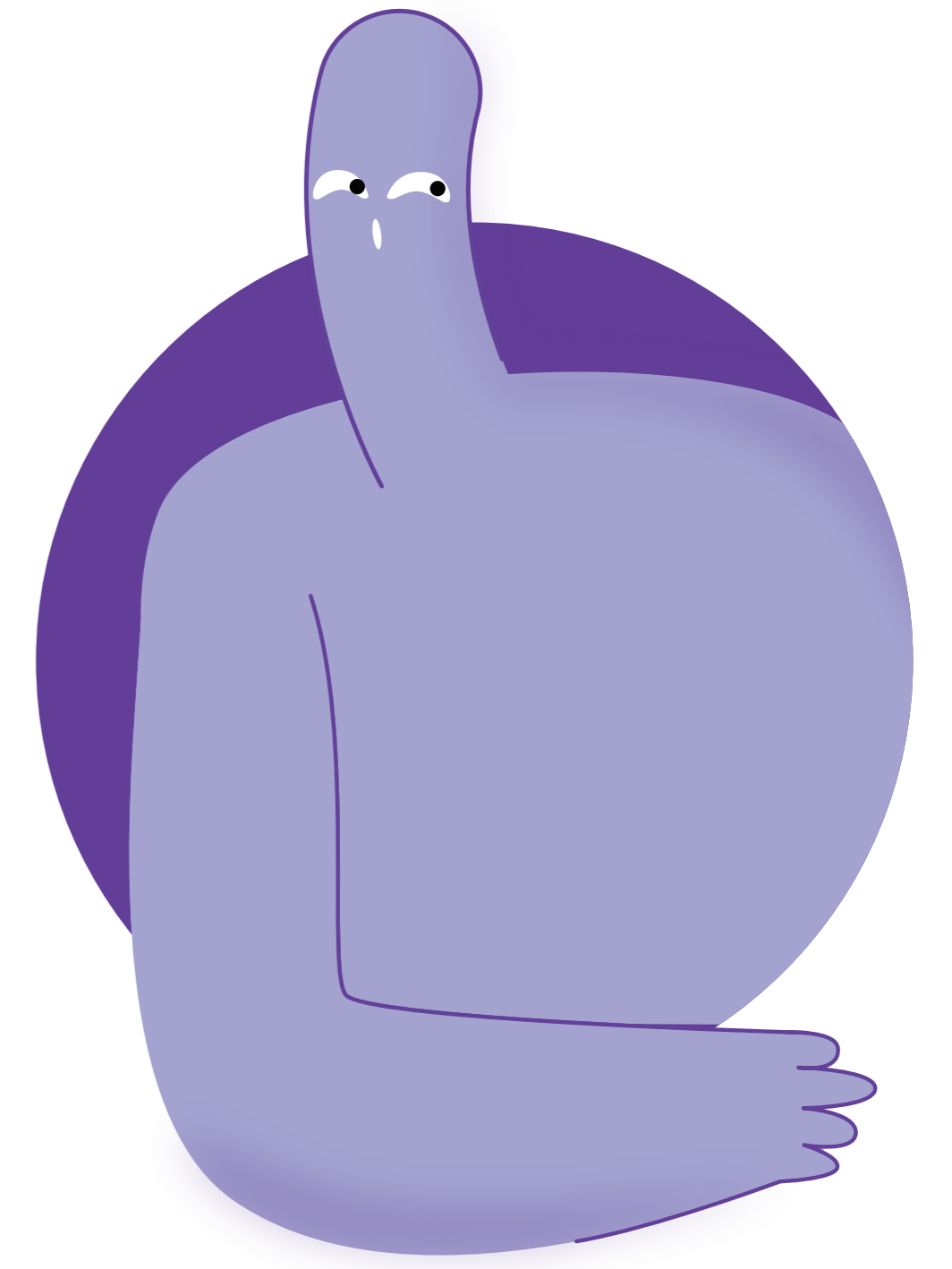


Syphilis is a sneaky...



Creating a syphilis social marketing campaign for men who have sex with men

Butler-Smith, C.¹, Clotworthy, B.¹, Leakey, C.J.¹, Hollingshead, B.M.¹, Blackler, G.¹

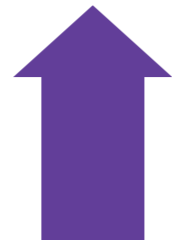
¹ Burnett Foundation Aotearoa ciarin.butler-smith@burnettfoundation.org.nz

Syphilis cases are on the rise in Aotearoa New Zealand¹.

From the 1st to 4th quarter of 2022:



41% increase in general syphilis cases

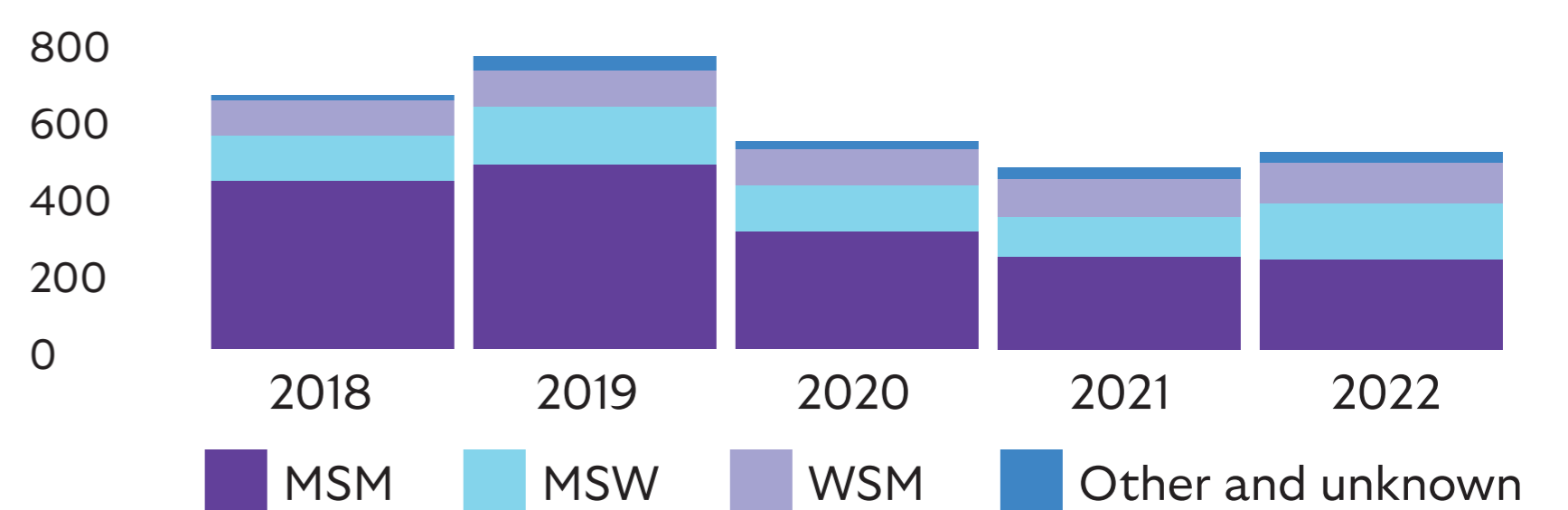


81% increase in cases amongst MSM

Recognising the need to respond to these increases in syphilis cases, we sought to create a new health promotion campaign to engage MSM, raise awareness, and promote testing for syphilis.

Given changes in the social environment following COVID-19, the new rise in cases, and considering our organisational rebrand, we worked to create a fresh campaign.

Syphilis cases by sexual behaviour¹.



Māori and Pacific MSM comprise 24% and 12% of all 2022 MSM cases respectively¹, indicating inequities for these populations.



Poster

Instagram carousel, explaining the stages of syphilis

The hook for the character was the fact that many syphilis cases appear asymptotically

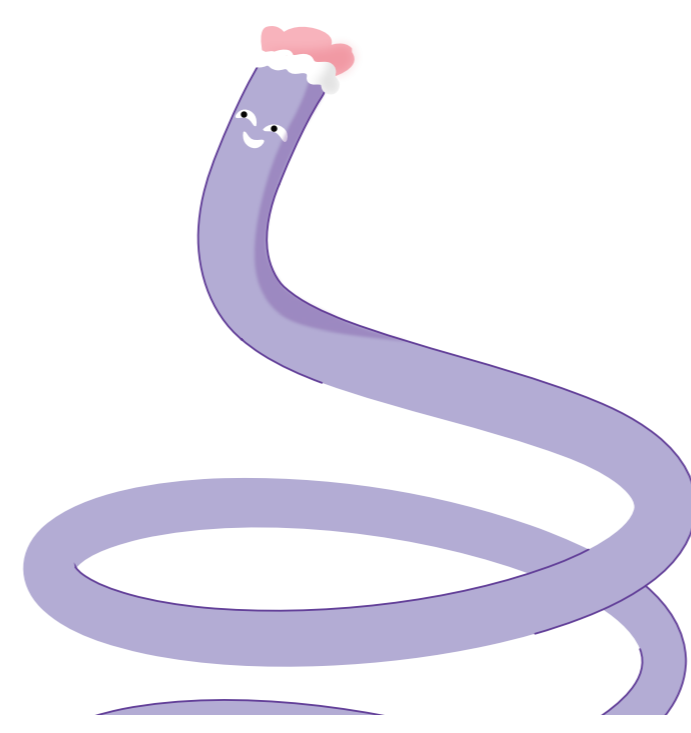
This fact led to the decision to focus on asymptomatic and unintentional syphilis transmission, a concept which would be familiar to audiences given the health language used during COVID-19. The potential for asymptomatic transmission was considered to have an emotional appeal.

- This led to a creative decision to represent syphilis as a character that only the audience can see, but who is invisible to the people in the image – this idea of an uninvited or unknown viral vector being one previously played upon in other health promotion campaigns.
- Since we were using stock imagery as the basis for creative assets, the syphilis character needed to have a very different look and feel to regular photos. We decided on an illustration-based concept to have the biggest juxtaposition.

- We also introduced several other versions of the character:
 - A spiral-based form, based on the shape of the syphilis virus. This motif was used in various ways, including as text.
 - A 'cute baby' syphilis character to represent syphilis at its pre-infection stage.
 - An 'annoying child' syphilis character to represent syphilis at its primary stage.
 - An 'emo teenager' syphilis character to represent syphilis at its secondary stage.

Platforms the campaign runs on:

- Meta (Facebook and Instagram)
- Grindr
- Porn sites such as Pornhub, Xtube, RedTube etc
- Google ads
- Our website



Outcomes and next steps:

The campaign has recently launched and aims to promote syphilis testing amongst MSM communities in order to prevent asymptomatic transmission and prevent onward transmission. Cases of syphilis continued to rise in Quarter 1 of 2023, and while the potential effects of this campaign are yet to be seen, the campaign has already been seen over 1 million times across Meta, Grindr, Traffic Junky, and Google.

We now plan to establish relationships with Māori and Pacific organisations and community groups to ensure future syphilis-focused health promotion is more culturally responsive. We aim to adapt the campaign with time to respond to local syphilis epidemiology and respond to trends. This campaign must ensure it meets communities needs. Nonetheless, reducing syphilis cases in the current environment appears challenging.

¹ ESR, 2023