

Is PrEP Promotion Leaving at-risk Youth Behind?

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Word count: 298 (including headings)

Stream/Track: Prevention, epidemiology and public health aspects of HIV in the Australasian region

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgement of Funding:

This research is supported by the Sexual Health Research Fund, an initiative of the Sexual Health Ministerial Advisory Committee, funded by Queensland Health. It is administered by ASHM.

Background:

Young people (16-24-years) represent a key group for HIV prevention pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) due to behavioural risks and known access barriers. However, Australian research and health promotion initiatives predominantly focus on older/adult gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (GBMSM). Whilst effectively aiding in reducing notification rates among adult GBMSM, rates among young people and other key populations including overseas-born and transgender people remain steady. This study aimed to understand if current PrEP-related promotion is reaching key populations of young people in Australia.

Methods:

Twenty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted with young people aged 16-24-years living in Queensland, who self-identified from key populations at increased risk of HIV. Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. Analysis were conducted using inductive thematic analysis.

Results:

Participants self-identified with a range of gender (e.g., male, non-binary, trans female) and sexual identities (e.g., gay, queer, bisexual). Ten (40%) were born overseas. Most participants reported awareness of PrEP (72%, 18), eight (32%) reported currently/previously using PrEP – most of which (7/8) were aged 20-24-years.

Three key themes were identified: 1) Current PrEP promotion targeted towards GBMSM created perceptions that HIV only affects 'gay men'; 2) Current promotion strategies that rely on fearmongering techniques surrounding high sexual activity inadvertently perpetuate stigma; 3) Broader promotion tackling stigma and societal norms is needed to create safer spaces and promote access to services for young people particularly those born-overseas.

Conclusions:

This research highlights how current targeted PrEP promotion, can create access barriers for young people and other key populations. Broader promotion of PrEP as a positive health choice, rather than based solely on identity and sexual practices/risk are needed to normalise PrEP use, reduce stigma and reach all key populations to ensure no one is left behind in the fight to end HIV transmission.