

EXPLORING UNDERSTANDINGS OF CHRONIC ILLNESS AMONG PEOPLE RECENTLY DIAGNOSED WITH HIV IN AUSTRALIA.

Authors:

Ellard J¹, Murphy DA^{1,2,3}

¹ Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, ² School of Population Health, UNSW Sydney, ³ School of Translational Medicine, Monash University

Background:

In the era of antiretroviral therapy HIV is described as a 'manageable chronic disease'. Chronic diseases are long lasting, have persistent effects, with their management reliant on medications and various forms of social and health care. In this paper we explore understandings of chronic illness (and the suitability of framing HIV in this way) among people recently diagnosed with HIV in Australia.

Methods:

The paper draws on interview data from the *Newly Positive* study comprised of 38 people diagnosed with HIV in the previous 12 months. The interview schedule included a specific question about the meaningfulness of describing HIV as a chronic illness. We analysed responses to this question as well as narratives related to how people perceived HIV, including comparisons with other diseases.

Results:

Most participants believed that antiretrovirals would allow them to achieve good health and longevity. Diagnosing clinicians had typically informed participants about the effectiveness of treatment and reassured them that they could expect a 'normal' life. It was common for participants to use diabetes (a classic chronic illness) as a reference for their conceptualisations of HIV. However, when specifically asked whether they saw HIV as a chronic illness many participants rejected the description, mainly due to the lack of symptoms or any visible signs of illness and because of the capacity of antiretrovirals to make the virus undetectable. Some participants believed the framing of HIV as a chronic illness failed to encapsulate its social dimensions, including stigma and discrimination, as well as its potential effects on overseas travel, romantic relationships and visa status.

Conclusion:

In the context of effective antiretrovirals, conceptualising HIV as 'chronic' may have limited meaning for people newly diagnosed with HIV. This suggests the need for new ways to articulate the long-lasting and persistent effects of HIV disease.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society received funding for Newly Positive from the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care (Blood-Borne Viruses and Sexually Transmissible Infections – Surveillance Program). Dean Murphy has received honoraria and research funding from Gilead Sciences and ViiV Healthcare for other research unrelated to these studies. Jeanne Ellard has received honoraria from Gilead Sciences.