

CHALLENGING HIV-RELATED STIGMA AT THE SERVICE LEVEL

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Background: HIV-related stigma is a complex phenomenon that manifests at a personal (internalised) level for people living with HIV (PLHIV) but also relates to attitudes and discrimination at a structural/systems level. This complexity makes it challenging to design service-level anti-stigma initiatives.

We report findings from the HIV Futures 8 study exploring how PLHIV describe experiences of stigma, and identifying services and strategies people utilise to cope and live well with HIV.

Methods: HIV Futures 8 is a cross-sectional survey of 895 PLHIV in Australia. Data were collected in 2015/2016 using a self-complete instrument. Survey items reported in this paper include: the Berger stigma scale, and open ended questions in which participants were asked to describe experiences of stigma and use of HIV services. Open ended questions were hand coded to enable quantitative description and also analysed thematically (qualitatively).

Results: Higher perceived stigma was associated with: younger age, lower educational and income level, shorter time since HIV diagnosis, a detectable viral load, less time spent with HIV positive people and a diagnosed mental illness. Men who identified as bisexual or heterosexual also reported higher levels of perceived stigma.

The workplace was the most common place in which people had experienced recent HIV-related discrimination. Open ended questions also revealed the workplace is a key site in which people felt vulnerable to unwanted HIV-status disclosure, rejection or discrimination.

Many people described their experience of stigma in terms of feeling isolated or lonely. HIV-services (including online groups) played an important role in supporting social connection.

Conclusions: Social and support programs for PLHIV should be explicitly positioned as contributing to anti-stigma initiatives. Specific programs may be needed for heterosexual and bisexual men.

Programs focusing on workplace experiences of HIV-related discrimination would be valuable. This could potentially involve broad collaborations with unions or workplace advocacy services.

Disclosure of interest statement: The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.