

Untransmittable scepticism and stigma: understanding gay and bisexual men's perspectives towards sexual partners living with HIV

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Background:

'Untransmittable scepticism' is defined as hesitancy to fully embrace that an undetectable viral load (UVL) is zero risk. Recent research has identified wide variation but slightly increased willingness (due to UVL and PrEP) amongst gay and bisexual men (GBM) to have a sexual partner living with HIV, including when the partner has an UVL. The aim of this qualitative study was to better understand HIV stigma amongst GBM and those living outside of inner-Sydney, who may be less familiar with people living with HIV (PLHIV).

Methods:

In 2023, 32 GBM participated in semi-structured interviews. GBM were cisgender men, mostly gay (n=25), with 14 young (18-25 years), 16 living in regional NSW, and 11 in Greater Western Sydney. 27 were HIV-negative (7 currently using PrEP) and 5 were living with HIV. Data were analysed thematically.

Results:

Amongst HIV-negative GBM, three themes were developed: Open (n=9) comprised participants willing to have casual sex with PLHIV, based on comfort with UVL or their own PrEP or condom use. Engagement with health promotion (including ACON workshops) and contact with PLHIV was associated with openness. Caution (n=9) included hypothetical willingness but with reservations, including about trust in the partners' antiretroviral adherence, or needing more confidence and education. Rejective (n=6) comprised those who stated active avoidance of PLHIV, and they indicated heightened fears of acquiring HIV, mistrust of UVL, stigmatising attitudes towards PLHIV, or lack of knowledge about UVL.

Conclusion:

Untransmittable scepticism in this study included suspicion of partners' antiretroviral adherence, low knowledge of HIV transmission risk, fears of acquiring HIV, lack of familiarity with PLHIV, and stigmatising views of PLHIV. Many in this sample lived in Greater Western Sydney and regional parts of NSW, indicating a need to address stigma and mistrust through targeted education and visibility of PLHIV to reduce untransmittable scepticism.

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