

'A GAME-CHANGER': EVALUATING PREFERENCES AND ACCEPTABILITY OF NOVEL ACTIVE SYPHILIS SELF-TESTING MODALITIES AMONG GAY AND BISEXUAL MEN IN AUSTRALIA.

Authors:

Ryan B^{1,2}, Draper B^{1,2}, Williams E¹, Zheng S¹, Halliwell F¹, Harney B¹, Drummer HE^{1,3,4}, Stoové M^{1,2,5}, Traeger M^{1,2}

¹ Burnet Institute, Melbourne, VIC, Australia, ² School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia, ³ Department of Microbiology and Immunology, Peter Doherty Institute for Infection and Immunity, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, ⁴ Department of Microbiology, Monash University, Clayton, Victoria, Australia, ⁵ Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Background:

Low-cost, rapid point-of-care tests for active syphilis is a key priority in global STI strategies. Burnet Institute has developed a rapid point-of-care self-test for syphilis that distinguishes active syphilis from past-treated cases by detecting immunoglobulin A antibodies to a combination of *Treponema pallidum* antigens. We explored the acceptability and preferences related to syphilis self-testing (SST) among gay and bisexual men (GBM) in Australia.

Methods:

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 GBM aged 25-45 years between September 2024-March 2025. A qualitative descriptive methodology was adopted, with thematic analysis guided by a conceptual framework of access to health care proposed by Levesque and colleague.

Results:

Eight participants were using PrEP and four were living with HIV. Two had ever used an HIV self-test and seven had ever been diagnosed with syphilis. Participants considered SST an 'extremely useful tool' and the ability to detect active syphilis as 'a game-changer'. Most participants still indicated preference for maintaining routine clinic-based testing, acknowledging the benefits of in-person comprehensive sexual health care. Participants' preferences for SST included testing in response to a specific potential exposure or around periods of increased risk, and to avoid adding to the perceived over-burden on sexual health clinics. Key concerns related to SST were risk of user error and higher out-of-pocket costs relative to subsidised pathology testing. Preferences of where SST should be made available were places participants perceived as offering anonymity and ease of access (pharmacies and supermarkets) or sex on premises venues and nightclubs.

Conclusion:

Achieving public health utility from emergent STI testing technologies, requires consideration of the values and preferences of GBM. SST was highly acceptable as

an additional testing tool among GBM but not as a replacement of clinic-based testing. Convenience, anonymity, cost and test performance were factors affecting potential uptake of SST.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

M Traeger has received consulting fees from Gilead Sciences Ltd.

Heidi Drummer, Elsie Williams and Shuning Zheng are inventors of a patent filed by Burnet Institute on the Active Syphilis Test licensed to Atomo Diagnostics.