

Supporting antiretroviral therapy uptake and adherence for people living with HIV in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Background:

Antiretroviral therapy (ART) has dramatically reduced morbidity and mortality for people living with HIV (PLHIV), can prevent transmission to sexual partners, and is key to ending the HIV epidemic. However, the impact of ART is blunted when there are inequalities in treatment access and outcomes, arising when services do not specifically meet the needs of underserved populations. While the majority of PLHIV in New Zealand (NZ) are thought to be on ART, there are notable inequalities in viral load suppression. To address such inequalities, we need to better understand the experiences of people who are not on ART or experience difficulties staying on ART, and understand the barriers they face, and their views on how these barriers could be overcome.

Methods:

This is a qualitative study in which we interviewed PLHIV (n=8) who self-identify as not being on ART, or experiencing difficulty staying on ART. Interviews were conducted via Zoom or telephone and were audio recorded. Recordings were transcribed verbatim, and thematically analysed using the framework method.

Results:

A number of barriers to ART adherence were identified, including mistrust of health professionals, often grounded in experiences of stigma, discrimination and trauma; desire to maintain power and agency over diagnosis and treatment; lack of identification with support services; physical access to pharmacy and health professionals; changes in treatment regime, prescribing clinician, or pharmacist; changes in daily routine; and fatigue associated with long-term daily medication. Participants also identified a number of policies and strategies that have, or could, improve their adherence to ART.

Conclusion:

Better understanding the barriers to ART uptake and adherence in PLHIV in NZ, and how these barriers might be overcome, could help Support Services improve their support for those struggling with treatment adherence, and guide Infectious Disease Clinicians in the management and care of their patients.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

None