

“THAT WON'T HAPPEN TO US “: PrEP KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES OF YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING IN AUSTRALIA

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Background:

The Australian Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme expanded its pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) eligibility criteria in January 2021, allowing people under 18-years access to government-subsidised PrEP. This qualitative study explored the knowledge, attitudes and practices of young people from priority populations at increased risk of HIV to gather understanding of factors influencing Australian young people's PrEP access and uptake.

Methods:

Twenty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted with young people aged 16-24-years living in Queensland who self-identified as at increased risk of HIV. Analysis were conducted using inductive thematic analysis.

Results:

Fourteen participants were Australian-born, 8 were overseas-born. Participants self-reported various genders (including male, non-binary, trans female, trans male) and sexualities (including bisexual, gay, queer). Majority (73%, 16) were aware of PrEP, 8 (36%) reported current/previous PrEP use.

Several factors were identified to influence access and uptake of PrEP: 1) PrEP knowledge was low, with greater awareness leading to improved access, 2) Beliefs like PrEP is for 'promiscuous' people resulted in judgment and barriers, but others believed PrEP use was positive leading to proactive health choices, 3) Misconceptions including 'HIV was a thing in the 80's' contributes to low perceptions of HIV risk, 4) Negative healthcare provider experiences create barriers to access, however an affirming provider creates space and safety for raising PrEP conversations, 5) Young people 'tune out' during school sex-ed finding it inadequate and unengaging, but acknowledge it is a missed opportunity to incorporate PrEP education.

Conclusion:

PrEP interventions targeted and responsive to the diverse needs and beliefs of young people are needed. These strategies need to be designed to increase PrEP knowledge and reduce stigma and misconceptions related to HIV, sexual identity, and behaviours. Healthcare providers also need to work towards reducing negative experiences and providing safe and responsive sexual health and HIV/PrEP care if Australia is to achieve national HIV targets.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.