

# DISSONANCES IN COMMUNICATION WITH SEXUAL HEALTH CONSUMERS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE ACCESSIBILITY OF AN INNER-SYDNEY SEXUAL HEALTH CLINIC IN THE CONTEXT OF HEALTH LITERACY

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**Background:** The sexual health space has changed dramatically with the introduction of biomedical prevention strategies. This study examined the navigation of health care interactions by health consumers attending Sydney Sexual Health Centre (SSHC), the largest publicly-funded sexual health clinic in New South Wales, Australia. We aimed to assess the accessibility and appropriateness of communications between SSHC and its patients in the context of health literacy.

**Methods:** We conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with patients of SSHC, covering topics such as communication with clinicians and engagement with written materials. Each participant completed a brief health literacy assessment using the Short Health Literacy Assessment for English Speaking Adults (SAHL-E) tool. We also conducted a focus group with three staff members, representing each clinical unit within SSHC: medical officers, nursing unit and counselling unit.

**Results:** We identified dissonances around assumed knowledge in communications between health professionals and health consumers at SSHC, which were most apparent in clinical communications about the conduct of tests, test results and treatments. Communication difficulties were amplified when lack of knowledge about sexual health and HIV intersected with poor English fluency.

**Conclusion:** This study suggests that existing models of access for HIV treatment and distribution of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) in Australia have been developed for people with high health literacy and may be inadequately structured to support consumers who experience communication barriers in their care due to low health literacy.

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