

“I FEEL THAT I’M FINALLY FULLY ENJOYING SEX FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE”: THE IMPACT OF PREP ON SEXUAL CULTURES FROM THE SIN-PREP STUDY

Haire B^{1,2}, Maher L¹, Vaccher S¹, Callander D¹, Cook T³, Murphy D⁴, Kaldor J¹, Zablotska-Manos I¹

¹The Kirby Institute ²Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations ³ACON

⁴University of Sydney

Background: More than 6,100 gay and bisexual cisgender and transgender men (GBM) are accessing HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) in NSW through the EPIC-NSW study. Sin-PrEP explores the culture of PrEP adoption and changing meanings of ‘safe sex’.

Methods: Between 2015 and 2017 in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 PrEP users, 7 sexually active PrEP non-users and 7 healthcare providers. Six participants were re-interviewed 9-18 months after their first interview. Three focus groups were conducted with professionals in Sydney and Melbourne. Data were analysed thematically.

Results: Themes included risk-reduction, access, anxiety, sexual capital, stigma, sexual citizenship, reciprocity, responsibility, risk, negotiation, and changing practices over time. Of the 25 PrEP users, four had switched from personal importation to the EPIC-NSW trial, and three had ceased use. Participants reported a range of risk reduction practices. Most users reported reducing their condom use following PrEP uptake. Almost all men had accessed PEP prior to PrEP, including two using PEP-as-PrEP. Healthcare providers and HIV negative non-PrEP users expressed concerns about potential increases in STIs. Positive social implications of PrEP included relief from HIV anxiety, easier sexual negotiation between serodiscordant partners, and a burgeoning of informal peer-based sexual health support in response to increasing complexity of HIV prevention options. Apprehension that PrEP was becoming a new norm that reduced the sexual capital of non-users was a negative implication.

Conclusion: Sex cultures in GBM are changing. Some aspects of PrEP adoption reported in SIN-PrEP indicate a developing culture of care and mutual responsibility. There is however also evidence of normative pressure to adopt PrEP over condom use to maintain sexual capital. Potential increases in STIs are also of concern to some community members. Health promotion specialists need to engage with both the negative and positive impacts of PrEP to support an inclusive culture that minimises HIV risk.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: Bridget Haire receives funding support from the NHMRC. This study has received in-kind support from ACON.