

ENDING HIV TRANSMISSION IN AUSTRALIA: PrEP ACCESS FOR WOMEN

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Background:

Although new HIV notifications in Australia have declined significantly in the last 10 years, particularly since the availability of PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis), the rate of notifications in women remains unchanged. With strategic goals targeting the elimination of HIV transmission in Australia by 2025, we explored women's knowledge of and access to PrEP.

Methods:

We conducted interviews with cis- and transgender women recruited via social media, GP practices and other health care services. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted using Nvivo.

Results:

We interviewed 19 women (16 cisgender and 3 trans or gender diverse) who identified as both straight and queer. Of these, 4 had previously been prescribed PrEP. Women had limited knowledge of PrEP, particularly its availability for women. Knowledge was usually facilitated through gay male friends and family. Several women indicated that their sexual behaviours might place them at risk of HIV and were generally positive about PrEP. Perceived barriers were consistent with international literature: lack of patient and provider knowledge, cost, side effects and access. Women who had taken PrEP were sexually adventurous and had to advocate for access to overcome healthcare providers' initial scepticism of their HIV risk. Concerns about PrEP stigma were limited, but women were concerned about stigma towards their sexual behaviours.

Conclusion:

Current PrEP prescriber guidelines are premised on a 'knowledgeable patient'. However, this is an environment where women have limited access to information about PrEP. Although PrEP is indicated for women, current Australian PrEP guidelines refer to 'heterosexual women' despite women linked to LGBTIQ+ communities having greater potential HIV exposure due to sexual mixing with MSM. If Australia is to achieve HIV transmission elimination by 2025, we need to specifically think about how to provide information about PrEP to women and to enable their access where indicated.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: