



## Becoming Serodiscordant: The Seroconversion Study Interviews

Steven Philpot, Jeanne Ellard, Benjamin Bavinton, Ian Down, Garrett Prestage

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### The Seroconversion Study

- Aimed at gaining the perspectives of people recently diagnosed with HIV
- Participants were invited to participate in interviews after completing their questionnaire, and were recruited between 2009 and 2014
- Interviews covered seroconversion 'event', sexual practices prior to diagnosis, reaction to and management of diagnosis, sexual practices post-seroconversion, and attitudes towards treatment and viral load

## Sample

- 111 interviews
- Ages ranging between 19 and 70, median age 37
- Vast majority gay-identified, and a few were bisexual, queer, or 'confused'
- 99 were employed and 40 had university education
- The majority identified as Caucasian or Anglo-Australian
- Interviews conducted in all states and the ACT, but not in NT
  
- Relationships: 75 single men, 25 discordant, 10 concordant, 1 coupled but his partner's status not divulged

## This Presentation

- An analysis of **41 participants**:
  - The 25 men in serodiscordant relationships
  - 6 single men who were previously in relationships, but those relationships ended once they were diagnosed with HIV
  - 10 single men who discussed previous serodiscordant relationships in which they were the HIV-negative partner
  
- **Aim: How do newly serodiscordant couples manage an HIV diagnosis?**

## Current Literature

- Serodiscordant couples frequently assert the everyday insignificance of HIV, counter assumptions that serodiscordance is undesirable and a barrier to intimacy, and successfully integrate it into their daily lives to the point that it exists on the peripheral
- Couples who experience a diagnosis when their relationship is already well established may face unique relational challenges

## Findings

- Renegotiating sex: infectiousness, responsibility, and intimacy
- Reaffirming relationships: love, support, and strength

## Renegotiating Sex - Infectiousness

The first time it happened, he just entered without a condom. **And I remember practically crawling up the bed, going, "What are you doing?" I freaked out. The next morning I said, "Look, I need you to understand that I can't do that."** And he did understand.

But [partner] continued to pursue the unsafe sex thing, and it gutted me every time having to have that conversation. One day it got to a point where I just called it out and ended it. The support he gave me I could never thank him enough for. But I couldn't impact his life like that.

Jack, 23, QLD

## Renegotiating Sex - Reduced Intimacy

After all that time of having sex without condoms and then having to go back to condoms, obviously we saw that as a deficit. **And it became a real psychological barrier for me having to put a condom on to have sex with the person that I want to spend the rest of my life with... He saw it as a frustration and an irritation, and a barrier.** And I think that frustration just built and built until he said, "I have to stop using rubbers." And if that meant him becoming positive then that's what'll happen.

Isaiah, 45, WA

## Renegotiating Sex - Responsibility

Now I'm on the other side of the fence, it's quite a head fuck – **through having sex with somebody who you like, you could cause them to have something which would cause trouble and heartache for them... There's a weight and a duty of care that I feel, and although others shirk that responsibility, I can't.**

**Pete, 34, NSW**

## Reaffirming Relationships - Support

I was happy I found somebody, and that I was in love with somebody who'd promise they'd stay by me no matter what... So there was a part of me that just **didn't care about how the HIV was going to impact my life because I was so infatuated by being in love...**

Having somebody say they're gonna stick with you no matter what... it gave me that sense of, "Oh wow! This guy must really love me if he's saying all these things."

**Will, 36, SA**

## Reaffirming Relationships - Strengthening

We knew the relationship was fairly broken and, if we wanted to continue, then we'd have to do a lot of work. **So this whole thing is like a reboot. It's just forced us to talk and be honest...**

He said fairly early on, "If we hadn't gone down that track of hiding things from each other, we wouldn't have ended up where we are. So, if you wanna have sex outside the relationship, then we should just be honest as to what is acceptable or not." And that's what we've been doing. **We've just been talking now more than ever.**

Hayden, 45, WA

## Reaffirming Relationships - Love

**So we didn't go out purposefully looking for it but he said he didn't want to change the sex we had and that if he ended up with HIV then so be it.** People listen to that and get a bit dumbstruck, but to know our relationship is to know that it's just natural. **But, I didn't want to be the one responsible for giving him the virus. So I think, in a way, he tried to abrogate that responsibility away from me. He said, "Fine, I'm gonna go elsewhere and have unsafe sex."** And 12 months later, he came back positive. He was happy with it. That was the objective he wanted, so that we could have the open, comfortable relationship we had before.

Isaiah, 45, WA

## Summary

- Narratives that reaffirm relationships tend to outshine the difficulties associated with managing a new HIV diagnosis, but not universally
- Couples who face a diagnosis within established relationships must grapple with changes to intimacy where it was previously already cemented
- With UVL for prevention now being widely practiced among serodiscordant couples, how might couples who experience a diagnosis navigate HIV prevention?

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