

BIOMEDICAL HIV PREVENTION, SEXUAL PLEASURE AND INTIMACY

Wells N¹

¹ Department of General Practice, Monash University

Background: HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and treatment as prevention (TasP) have had significant impacts on the sexual culture of men who have sex with men (MSM). Drawing on ethnographic data exploring the emergence of biomedical HIV prevention in Melbourne, and its impact on MSM, this paper specifically examines how PrEP and TasP have affected the experience of sex.

Methods: Ethnographic observations were conducted in both Melbourne and the social media pages of two Australian-based PrEP advocacy groups between November 2017 and September 2018. An additional 19 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with PrEP users (15) and people living with HIV (4). Interview participants were recruited through PrEP advocacy groups (9), internet-based dating apps (3), personal networks (1) and purposive sampling (6). Observational and interview data were analysed thematically.

Results: Overwhelmingly, interview participants felt PrEP and TasP provided a greater sense of control and empowerment over their sexual health, particularly for those taking a receptive role during anal sex. Participants reported feeling a greater sense of sexual pleasure, both physical and emotional, by not using condoms.

A common theme to emerge was a feeling of increased intimacy during sexual encounters. This was divided into three sub-themes. Firstly, condomless sex gave a sense of removing both a physical and psychological barrier between sexual partners. Secondly, the exchange of semen during sex was described as connecting partners both physically and spiritually. Thirdly, PLHIV described TasP as providing reassurance that they were not putting their partners' sexual health at risk, enabling them to more fully engage during sex.

Conclusion: PrEP and TasP are more than simply strategies to prevention HIV. They offer the potential for new opportunities to experience sexual pleasure and intimacy between partners. In doing so, PrEP and TasP offer the potential for new experiences of sex, as well as sexuality, relationships and identity.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: This study is supported by an Australian government Research and Training Scholarship. No pharmaceutical grants were received in the development of this study.