

Pleasure and risk: responding to sexualised drug use and chemsex among MSM

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Abstract:

Gay communities have higher rates of substance use and sexualised drug use is common. The FLUX study of gay and bisexual men in New Zealand found more than half of those who recently used a drug were motivated by having 'better sex'. Chemsex is an intense form of sexualised drug use that is characterised by the concurrent use of methamphetamine and GHB/GBL in group sex settings. Also called 'party and play' it is often organised through hook-up apps and hosted in private homes where sessions can last up to three days. Sex is often condomless and long lasting with the 'chems' increasing sex drive and endurance. Those engaging in chemsex are often motivated by pleasure, pushing boundaries, being disinhibited and having collective experiences. Despite not intending to be harmed it is a high risk practice with risk of HIV, sexually transmitted infections, overdose, non-consensual sex, violence, and addiction. Acute trauma can compound with difficulties related to sexual identity, isolation from the gay community, potential criminal charges and stigma related to drug use.

In New Zealand chemsex is rare but men engaging were more likely to be mid 30s, single, HIV positive, using PrEP if HIV negative, have had a recent STI, have anxiety or depression, and have gay friends (FLUX NZ). This group also had very high rates of engagement in sexual health services and are likely to identify chemsex as 'sex issue' rather than a 'drug problem'. This presents an opportunity for early intervention within sexual health services as they often request disclosure of drug use, also culturally competent, have a high level of trust, and provide harm reduction advice around sexual health. Including drug use into a non-judgemental conversation about sexual health, providing drug harm reduction advice, and referring onto community or peer based services are all shown to be effective in reducing the risk of harm from chemsex and sexualised drug use.