Acceptability of HIV Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis among HIV-negative Men who have Sex with Men in Switzerland. Insights of a Focus Group Study.

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Background

There are about 500 to 600 newly diagnosed HIV infections in Switzerland each year (2014; 519). Half of these are among men who have sex with men (MSM) whereby MSM represent approximately 3% of the sexually active male population (1). This highlights the fact that MSM are disproportionately affected by HIV. Despite a wide range of interventions, the rate of newly diagnosed infections has remained relatively stable during the past few years. Thus the HIV Pre-Exposure-Prophylaxis (PrEP) is discussed as an additional prevention method targeting MSM.

Methods

Recruitment and sample
- Consecutive sampling: MSM, HIV-negative, residing in Switzerland, no previous PrEP-experience
- Recruiting channels: Online dating platforms and Facebook
- Distribution of flyers at checkpoints, bars and parties
- Registration: Homepage with registration features (http://www.prepstudy.ch/)

Data collection
- 5 semi-structured focus group discussions with 23 participants (Dec 2014 - Feb 2015)
- Oral short description of PrEP: Application, effectiveness, potential side and long-term effects, costs
- Discussions took place in German- and French-speaking cities of Switzerland (Olten, Zurich, Lausanne)
- 2 discussion leaders with broad knowledge of the topic (part of target group)
- Short questionnaire for socio-demographic characteristics

Analysis
- Focus group discussions were digitally recorded and fully transcribed
- Structuring qualitative content analysis (2)
  - deductively developed categories on the basis of a theoretical acceptance model
  - inductively developed (sub-)categories

Table 1: Description of sample (n=23)

| Age | 22-60 years |
| Sexual orientation | homosexual, bisexual |
| Relationship status | single, stable relationship, registered partnership, marriage |
| Educational level | vocational training to university degree |
| Occupational level | unemployed, full or part-time employment, student |
| Community type | cities, suburbs, rural communities |
| Monthly income (CHF) | 0-15,000 |

Results

Expected usefulness
- alternative to condom
- additional protection to regular condom use
- protection in case of condom failure (e.g. as a result of reduced behavioural control)
- increase in perceived protection and in independence in protective behaviour during receptive anal intercourse
- positive experience of corporality
- engagement in sexual activities with less worries and anxieties

Concerns and objections
- high costs
- insufficient efficacy
- invisible impairment of protection (in comparison to condom)
- lack of protection against other STIs
- potential side and medical long-term effects
- chemical exposure to ARVs
- erectile dysfunction, loss of libido
- objections against pharmaceutical industry
- pathologizing sexuality of MSM
- cost development in health care system

Conclusion

The acceptability and future adoption of PrEP varied considerably among the participants. MSM who are not able or not willing to use condoms consider PrEP as an option. Ambivalent MSM formulate prerequisites regarding the context of use, the application, the costs, and further modalities on which they intend to base their decision. MSM who do not mention any problems in condom use question the purpose of PrEP and show no intention to use it.

Various aspects of expected usefulness, concerns and objections regarding PrEP as well as the attitude towards and the experience in condom use seem to be relevant factors regarding the intention to use PrEP. The results provide a valuable basis for a model explaining the acceptability of PrEP among MSM. In a next step, the identified factors will be tested in a quantitative follow-up study. The results contribute significantly to the discussion concerning the introduction of PrEP in Switzerland and its anticipated effects on HIV prevention.

References