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. So far, PrEP has not been approved in Switzerland and little is known about the acceptability of PrEP among Swiss MSM. Therefore, the main objectives of the study were

- to examine the acceptability of PrEP among MSM in Switzerland, and
- to identify relevant factors regarding the intention to use PrEP

Recruitment and sample

Methods

- 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 partys
- 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)
 - o deductively developed categories on the basis of a theoretical acceptance model
 - o 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

	Concerns and objections	
high costs		

- 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 corporeality
- engagement in sexual activities with less worries and anxieties
 - Accepting
 - focus on high expected usefulness
 - would use PrEP immediately after introduction
 - mention problems in condom use
 - rarely tend to use condoms
 - negative attitude towards condoms
 - no further questions despite costs and financing

«... I would definitely take it, this PrEP, so I would definitely go for it» (T2/4:61)

Ambivalent

- expected usefulness; simultaneously concerns and objections
- intention related to context/situation (e.g. single, serodiscordant relationship, initial phase of new relationship)
- improved form in terms of application, substance, costs/financing, efficacy

«... there will probably be more situations in which it would be right. Maybe one has to seriously consider it. » (T3/1:574)

- 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

Refusing

- focus on concerns and objections
- would not consider using PrEP
- successfully adopted safer sex practices
- do not mention any problems in condom use
- refuse medical prophylaxis

«... For me it [PrEP] actually wouldn't be suitable either way» (T5/3:418)

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 followup study. The results contribute significantly to the discussion concerning the introduction of PrEP in Switzerland and its anticipated effects on HIV prevention.

References

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