



PrEP and MSM: A South African Community Perspective

Men Who Have Sex With Men:

Men who have sex with Men (MSM) is a diverse group of males who have sex with other males, regardless of whether or not they are married, have sex with women, or identify as gay or bisexual. MSM exist in most communities throughout the country, and thus should share the same Constitutional rights as other South African citizens. Unfortunately though, research has shown that MSM in South Africa are unable to effectively access healthcare that is sensitive to their needs. The fact that some MSM do not feel comfortable seeking out health services reduces the likelihood that HIV and other STIs will be detected, increasing the group's overall infection rates.

What is Pre-exposure Prophylaxis?

Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (called "PrEP") is Anti-retroviral (ARV) medication given to HIV-negative people in order to prevent infection. The Global iPrEX study examined the effectiveness of PrEP on MSM, calling on the Desmond Tutu HIV Foundation (DTHF) and 10 other sites around the world to conduct the study. Results from the trial proved that the daily use of PrEP, in conjunction with a standard prevention package, was 44% effective in protecting participants from HIV infection. These results have since been supported with even more studies on PrEP, including PartnersPrEP and CDC TDF2, which showed 63% and 78% efficacy in heterosexual participants.

Moving PrEP Forward

PrEP remains a very important and effective tool for preventing HIV in South Africa, but PrEP still needs community input before it is widely accepted and implemented. In order to more effectively decide how PrEP will be integrated into South Africa's overall HIV prevention strategy, the MSM community must be engaged. Learning from MSM and listening to the community's opinions on PrEP is a critical step; only with this input will PrEP studies and implementation continue at this promising pace.

In 2011, DTHF partnered with AVAC on a nation-wide advocacy project gathering and synthesizing the MSM community's under-represented opinions. In-depth discussions, workshops and training sessions were held with MSM, service providers, researchers and other key stakeholders to explore community attitudes towards HIV prevention and PrEP.

The opinions, ideas and information gathered during these session are currently being analyzed, and serve as a preliminary look into community attitudes and beliefs.





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Initial thoughts and Questions from MSM Key Stake Holders:

In the focus groups, participants raised some interesting questions about a potential PrEP rollout: Who would prescribe PrEP once it's widely available? How would adherence be monitored, and would there be additional training for health professionals? Could South Africa's current health system and infrastructure support PrEP implementation?

Overall, there was enthusiasm for PrEP and other new HIV preventions. Despite the fact that PrEP is an expensive drug, it holds a lot of promise for South Africa, MSM, and the health profession as a whole. Since there is still no cure for HIV, prevention is the most important next step in slowing the epidemic. Prevention today saves money tomorrow.

Community involvement:

It is important how PrEP is framed in order to promote community involvement and uptake. How do we make PrEP accessible? How do we promote it? How do we counter abuse, misuse, myths, and misconceptions? How will PrEP in the MSM community impact homo-negativity? How can political leaders in homophobic countries present PrEP as a prevention tool?

Recommendations:

- Include Men who have sex with Men in prevention plans to ensure this high-risk population is part of HIV prevention efforts.
- Involve policy makers and encourage discussion of MSM.
- Create South African-specific PrEP Guidelines for a national rollout.
- Involve human rights groups in policy discussions on PrEP
- Encourage confirmatory studies on the technical guidelines for PrEP.
- PrEP should not be discussed as an isolated entity, but rather as part of a wider prevention package.

Advocacy for improved access to PrEP will set the stage for a long-term HIV prevention plan. PrEP is an exciting new addition to the HIV prevention buffet, but broad-based collaboration is needed to promote a holistic human-rights-framed approach to combating new infections. In the absence of a cure for HIV, prevention remains the most important and cost-effective way to keep the population healthy. Even though there are social and economic barriers to distributing PrEP throughout Africa, it is important to realize that PrEP is a critical part of HIV prevention package.

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