

# **PrEP, risk and sexual behaviours: PrEP users' critiques of "risk compensation" language**

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## **Background:**

Highly effective, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) offers the potential for men who have sex with men (MSM) to experience condomless anal sex (CAS) while protecting themselves against HIV. This challenge to condoms has generated considerable interest in condom use and STI rates among PrEP users. Described as "risk compensation," some have argued that an increase of STIs might negate benefits of PrEP. This presentation engages with PrEP users' attitudes toward descriptions of CAS as risk compensation.

## **Methods:**

This paper draws on ethnographic observations conducted in Melbourne between November 2017 and July 2018. Observations were also conducted on the social media pages of two Australian-based PrEP advocacy groups. 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with PrEP and HIV advocates, PrEP users, and people living with HIV. Thematic analysis techniques were used to interpret the data.

## **Results:**

Participants acknowledged STI prevention as important to sexual health. Some PrEP users felt that describing CAS as risk compensation was stigmatizing and lacked the nuance to fully address STI prevention. Criticisms fell into three categories. (1) PrEP users were not a bounded sexual category and could contract STIs from non-PrEP users. (2) As STIs could also be spread through oral sex, a narrow focus on CAS failed to account for how sex was experienced. (3) Anxieties around HIV and other STIs were significantly different. While contracting other STIs was considered undesirable, their impact was largely considered minimal when compared with the impact of HIV.

## **Conclusion:**

Research examining the impact of sexual health interventions on sexual behaviour is necessary. At the same time, it is important that research to also account for the various ways in which individuals engage in sex and the complex social worlds in which those experiences occur. Together with specific interventions, these behaviours and social worlds contribute to an individual's sexual health.

## **Disclosure of Interest Statement:**

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