

ADHERENCE AND ACCESS TO HIV ANTIRETROVIRAL THERAPY AMONG PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV IN MELBOURNE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Background: The social measures taken to control the COVID-19 pandemic have the potential to disrupt the management of HIV. The objective of this study was to examine the impact of the Australian COVID-19 lockdown restrictions on the adherence and access to antiretroviral therapy (ART) of people living with HIV in Melbourne.

Methods: Using data from the Melbourne Sexual Health Centre (MSHC), we assessed the changes in rates of ART postal delivery, controlled viral load and treatment adherence from 2018 to 2020. The percentage of ART delivered by postage from MSHC pharmacy was calculated weekly. The percentage of people living with HIV with a controlled viral load (≤ 200 copies/mL) was calculated monthly. The treatment adherence was assessed based on the yearly Medication Possession Ratio (MPR), calculated for the individuals with HIV ART dispensing recorded using the following formula:

$$\text{MPR} = \frac{\text{Number of days covered by ART in a timeframe}}{\text{Number of days in a timeframe}}$$

Results: The average percentage of HIV ART dispensed through postage for the years 2018, 2019 and 2020 were 3.2% (371/11496), 3.2% (380/12057) and 13.2% (1346/10161), respectively ($p_{\text{trend}} < 0.001$). The average percentage of people with an HIV viral load of ≤ 200 copies/mL for the years 2018, 2019 and 2020 were 97.6% (2266/2322), 98.0% (2387/2435) and 99.3% (1890/1904), respectively ($p_{\text{trend}} < 0.001$). Of the 3115 people living with HIV, the average MPR for the years 2018, 2019 and 2020 were 1.05, 1.07 and 1.17, respectively ($p_{\text{trend}} = 0.935$).

Conclusion: This study found that the percentage of controlled viral load and ART adherence of people living with HIV in Melbourne was largely unaffected by the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. This suggests that some of the services provided by MSHC during the pandemic, such as HIV ART postal delivery, may assist in long-term HIV management.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

All authors state they do not have a conflict of interest.

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