

Attitudes of MSM Toward Routine Quarterly STI Testing for Chlamydia and Gonorrhoea – A Qualitative Study

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Background:

Men who have sex with men (MSM) in Australia have disproportionately higher STI rates particularly those who take pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). MSM taking PrEP are required to have 3-monthly screening for chlamydia (CT) and gonorrhoea (NG) with high rates of asymptomatic CT and NG detected. While there is little evidence about the effectiveness of this screening interval, there is increasing concern about antibiotic use and its impact on antimicrobial resistance. There have been some calls to re-consider this frequent screening for CT and NG. We conducted interviews with MSM to assess their attitudes to 3-monthly CT and NG screening.

Methods:

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with MSM living in Victoria, Australia. Participants were aged 20-62 years and had been taking PrEP for at least six months. Recruitment occurred via physical and online advertising flyers (on Twitter and displayed in health clinics). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and these data were investigated through reflexive thematic analysis.

Results:

A total of 13 interviews were conducted between August and September 2021. Participants were hesitant about reducing the screening frequency and reported that testing gave them a sense of security. Whilst MSM recognized antimicrobial resistance was a concern, it did not impact their sexual behaviour, with many participants stating they would rather continue to take antibiotics to treat infections rather than adopt preventative measures such as condom use. Participants suggested that they would have more positive attitudes towards reducing the screening frequency if a trusted healthcare professional informed them about the natural history of CT and NG and the benefits and harms of screening and treatment.

Conclusion:

Whilst MSM on PrEP were initially hesitant to any changes in screening frequency, changes may be acceptable if there was transparent communication presenting the benefits and harms of screening and treatment delivered by a trusted healthcare professional.

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