Funded PrEP against the odds: the New Zealand experience

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Background/Purpose

The only New Zealand Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy was published in 2000 and the New Zealand HIV and AIDS Action Plan was subsequently published in 2003. Fifteen years later, the world has embraced the multiple tools now at our disposal to prevent HIV transmission (condoms, PrEP, UVL) but enabling policy and political leadership remains absent in New Zealand. Meanwhile, 2016 saw the highest number (244) of new HIV diagnoses ever recorded. Gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (GBM) are disproportionately impacted by the epidemic, consistently representing around 90% of locally acquired infections in recent years.

It is in this context that the New Zealand AIDS Foundation (NZAF) led a national reframing of HIV prevention, integrating into the response the combination of prevention tools available and adopting the aspirational goal of ending new HIV transmissions by 2025. Targeted uptake of PrEP at sufficient scale by those at highest risk will be critical if this goal is to be achieved.

Approach

NZAF sought to ensure that the role of PrEP was understood by GBM and that appropriate pathways existed for uptake. We:

- Fully integrated PrEP education into the delivery of the *Ending HIV* social marketing programme
- Led early conversations and efforts to challenge the medicolegal issues that were making it difficult to provide community education and facilitate easy and effective generic importation
- Delivered Community PrEP Forums across the country with panels comprised of PrEP users, prescribing clinicians, people living with HIV and NZAF representatives
- Empowered PrEP champions to develop their own online community through which they could share their experiences and advocate for change

Figure 1. A PrEP Community Forum held in Auckland

- Developed a community funding application, in the absence of an application from industry, and lodged this with New Zealand's medicines purchasing agency Pharmac, along with a 2,289 signature petition calling for an expedited funding decision
- Led the public framing of PrEP in both community and mainstream media, championing the role that it can play in a public health response to HIV
- Developed clinical sector partnerships to create an online learning course supporting clinicians to prescribe PrEP

PREP STREET POSTERS IN AUCKLAND (PHOTO SUPPLIED)

'A milestone step towards ending HIV': the truth about the PrEP funding decision

Jason Myers | Guest writer
Opinion

The executive director of the NZ AIDS Foundation responds to claims that Pharmac funding of a brand-name HIV drug is a waste of taxpayer money.

Figure 2. Hitting back at negative public framing of PrEP through guest editorial on thespinoff.co.nz

Outcomes/Impact

As a result of early work to integrate PrEP into HIV prevention messaging and facilitate the ease of generic PrEP importation, the proportion of GBM responding to an *Ending HIV* evaluation survey who reported taking PrEP increased from 0.7% in November 2016 to 5.7% in November 2017.

Following NZAF's funding application, PrEP was publicly funded in New Zealand for those at high risk of HIV acquisition from 1 March 2018 at a cost of $5 per three-month prescription. When making the funding announcement, Pharmac estimated that approximately 4000 individuals would be eligible and researchers have since revised this number to be 5816[1]. To the end of June this year, 847 had received a PrEP prescription.

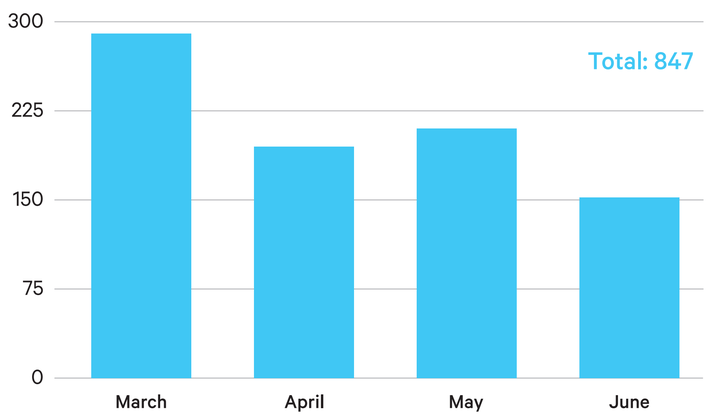

Figure 3. Funded PrEP prescriptions from 1 March to 30 June 2018

Community knowledge and attitudes around PrEP have been monitored. The proportion of those surveyed who reported knowing that PrEP is a daily pill that significantly reduces HIV transmission risk doubled to nearly 80% between November 2016 and November 2017.

The network of Specialists and General Practitioners with knowledge and expertise in PrEP is continually expanding. The *Ending HIV* website has an interactive map that now lists 42 locations around the country where people can expect to find a quality PrEP prescribing service.

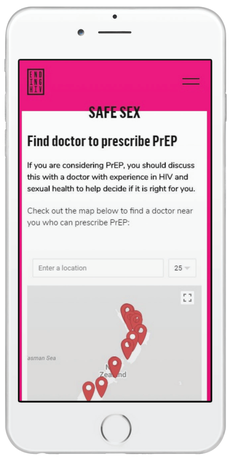

Figure 4. Online map of doctors prescribing PrEP nationwide

Innovation and Significance

The role of PrEP in the New Zealand HIV response in 2018 exemplifies the potential of community driven leadership, even in the absence of political will and enabling policy.

While funding is a significant milestone and community knowledge and PrEP uptake are increasing, significant challenges remain and will need to be overcome if PrEP is to reach full potential in the role it can play in driving down new infections. Despite being a funded medicine, there is still no policy or strategy to support PrEP use. There are ongoing challenges which include workforce capacity in sexual health services, lack of PrEP awareness and knowledge among GPs, an overly restrictive list of prescribers who can initiate PrEP and product pricing that discourages pharmacies from holding stock. Without action to address these issues, there is ongoing risk of PrEP being used sub-optimally.

Reference

[1] Saxton P, McAllister S. How many are eligible for PrEP? Implementing New Zealand's new publicly funded and targeted PrEP policy. Poster presented at 22nd International AIDS Conference, Amsterdam, 23-27 July 2018. http://aids2018-abstracts.org/pupload/file.php?s=0&f=0_12116.pdf

Acknowledgement

The NZAF thanks ACON for the generous and ongoing collaboration as we work together to end new HIV transmissions in our respective settings.

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Te Tūāpapa Mate Āraikore o Aotearoa