BLOOD-BORNE VIRUS PREVENTION AND BLOOD AWARENESS AMONG MEN WHO INJECT PERFORMANCE AND IMAGE-ENHANCING DRUGS

Background

Men who inject performance and image-enhancing drugs (PIEDs) are ten times more likely than the general population to be diagnosed with hepatitis C, yet have reportedly low rates of screening (Hope et al. 2017).

Risk of blood contact exists due to the use of large-gauge needles, intramuscular injection sites and repeated injecting, which can result in relatively high amounts of blood during injecting (Larance et al. 2008).

Questions remain around how to engage people who might not consider themselves vulnerable to hepatitis C transmission.

In this analysis, we consider how men who inject PIEDs understand their bodies, with a particular focus on blood awareness and infection control, to inform the development of effective engagement and education strategies.

Methods

Informed by theorist Margrit Shildrick's work on vulnerability and the body, the analysis draws on the first 36 interviews conducted for a national qualitative research project on men who inject PIEDs (target total n = 80).

Posters and flyers were circulated through NSPs, community health organisations and social media. The majority of participants were located in urban areas (n = 30) and were employed. Most were over the age of 26 (n = 27) and recruited through NSPs (n = 18).

Results

Men who inject PIEDs in this project typically describe themselves as not at risk of acquiring hepatitis C, but their knowledge of the virus is limited.

Their responses to questions on injecting present them as 'clean' and as consistent in their use of inward-oriented hygienic practices such as showering, swabbing, aspirating the syringe and monitoring potential external infection risks.

[I] don't go to the gym and then come home and just inject. I have a shower. I make sure my body's completely spotless. (Gabe, 22)

External contaminants, such as environmental dirt and bacteria, are represented as threats to the integrity of the 'clean and proper body' (Shildrick, 2001).

I don't remove anything from its packaging, everything stays in packages…I never touch any part that connects with my hands. (Alex, 38)

These perceptions underpin relatively cursory approaches to outward-oriented blood management and infection control.

Participants frequently injected PIEDs in shared domestic spaces, injected training partners and were injected by intimate partners, with some describing significant levels of blood flow.

You know, you get some blood out, you know, the oil comes out, whatever, you just put an alcohol wipe over it. It's not a big deal. (Sean, 27)

Participants also frequently describe rubbing the injection site to distribute the compound, but much more often describe washing hands and surfaces before injecting than after.

Conclusions

Educating PIEDs consumers about hepatitis C transmission processes may be warranted, along with further support for testing. In sum:

- Most men in our study present themselves as safe from hepatitis C. They tend to frame their bodies in terms of protecting purity and defending against intrusion, but know relatively little about hepatitis C.
- Men who inject PIEDs may benefit from targeted health promotion on environmental blood as a route of hepatitis C transmission.
- New education strategies may help engage this population, and in turn encourage more frequent hepatitis C testing.

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