

# WHEN COVID-19 THREATENS HIV RESEARCH: INNOVATIONS FROM SPOTS AND HOW WE PIVOTED OUR NATIONAL IN-PERSON STUDY ONLINE

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## Background/Purpose:

SPOTS (Sex and Prevention Of Transmission Study) is Aotearoa New Zealand's most ambitious investigation of HIV, sexual health and blood donation among men who have sex with men (MSM), wrapped into a single study. Fieldwork initially focused on nationwide six-city in-person recruitment including behavioural surveys and bio-specimen collection. In January 2022 three weeks from launch, Omicron triggered COVID-19 restrictions, forcing the study to pivot fully online.

## Approach:

We describe five innovations key to our successful pivot: a) Assembling a multidisciplinary team and extensive consultation; b) Pioneering dried blood spots (DBS) collection for HIV, HCV and syphilis; c) Reallocating resources to boost online engagement; d) Enhancing study branding, resources and tikanga (protocols) to improve community engagement, especially for Māori MSM; e) Upgrading IT solutions to reduce human error.

## Outcomes/Impact:

Early phase consultation gave us confidence to develop alternative fieldwork options quickly. The choice of DBS meant specimens could be self-collected by participants at home and delivered to the lab directly via post. Fieldwork staff were repurposed to packing ~3000 DBS kits. Study resources included instructional videos featuring Māori talent and Te Reo (Māori language), imagery reflecting diverse MSM, contemporary social media activation and provocative but respectful promotional taglines. IT solutions enabled us to ship and track large volumes of online participants.

## Innovation and Significance:

Innovative methods have often emerged from HIV and sexual health research with MSM. Challenged by COVID-19, we utilised trans-disciplinary practices, authentic engagement with communities, and openness to new ideas to launch SPOTS on April 26<sup>th</sup> 2022; a mere 2.5 month delay. High-quality online engagement and study experiences are critical for reaching recruitment targets, including i) a large and diverse behavioural survey sample to investigate the experiences of key MSM

subpopulations; ii) a good DBS return rate, that will be harder to achieve online than in-person.

**Disclosure of Interest Statement (example):**

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