

Exploring the attitudes of men who have sex with men on anal self-examination for early detection of primary anorectal syphilis: A qualitative study

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Background:

Sustained epidemics of syphilis among men who have sex with men (MSM) call for additional strategies to improve control. MSM practising receptive anal sex are more likely to present with secondary syphilis, suggesting anorectal primary lesions are likely to be missed. If men were able to detect anorectal lesions in the primary stage by regular anal self-examination (ASE), transmission could potentially be reduced by earlier detection and treatment. This study aimed to explore the attitudes of MSM on practising anal self-examination as a means to detect primary syphilis.

Methods:

In this qualitative descriptive study, 20 MSM over 18 years of age were purposively sampled from Melbourne Sexual Health Centre to participate in semi-structured interviews. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and data analysed thematically.

Results:

Four major themes emerged from the data; reasons for ASE, variable knowledge about ASE, preferred resources in implementing ASE as a screening tool, and attitudes to partner examination of the anus. The majority had conducted ASE previously; but only a few performed it regularly. Some of the reasons for performing ASE were medical reasons, pleasure and screening for anal pathology including sexually transmitted infections (STI). Most of the participants who were not regularly conducting ASE were uncertain about differentiating normal and abnormal findings from ASE, although they were willing to perform ASE regularly with appropriate support and guidance. The preferred resource for education on ASE that most participants wanted was online learning from a trusted source or organization. A number of the participants were agreeable to having a regular sexual partner conduct anal examination on them.

Conclusion:

Our study showed that MSM would like to receive some form of education and training to gain more confidence in conducting ASE as a screening tool. Further studies are required to explore the adherence and acceptability of ASE.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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