

Experiences of adjusting to HIV diagnosis among overseas-born gay and bisexual men

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Introduction

While new HIV diagnoses have been declining among Australian-born gay and bisexual men (GBM), the proportion of diagnoses among newly arrived overseas-born GBM has increased (Kirby 2021). We explored the experiences of overseas-born GBM in adjusting to a recent HIV diagnosis.

Methods

The RISE study is a qualitative cohort study of 34 people living with HIV. Participants had received an HIV diagnosis between 2016 and 2020. Interviews were conducted between 2019 and 2021 and analysed thematically. This analysis is based on a subsample of 10 overseas-born GBM, 6 of whom participated in follow-up interviews.

Findings

HIV diagnosis limits migration opportunities

Like their Australian-born peers, participants commonly found the experience of receiving a positive HIV diagnosis distressing. For some, this was compounded by concerns over the potential for HIV to limit opportunities to remain in Australia:

“I just felt number in my body and I just felt all of my dreams, all of my effort – I have no more future in Australia ... I tried to do something proper to reach my goal to have [a] good future, better life ... but when I got diagnosed with HIV, I just felt it stopped my dream”

- Marlon, gay male 37

Social isolation delays adjusting to diagnosis

Those who had recently arrived in Australia reported experiencing social isolation owing to their having only small social networks in Australia. These limited social networks made adjusting to their diagnosis challenging:

“The only people I could talk to were my gay friends ... I didn’t have that many gay friends, it was basically all straight friends. I didn’t know what to say to them at all because I knew they would freak out”

- Levi, gay male 23

Peer based programs as providing support

Participants commonly reported peer support programs as providing an important source of information, helping to navigate unfamiliar healthcare systems, while also enabling them to develop social relationships with other people living with HIV:

“Then I got some people around, you know, some nice group of people around who were like, very sweet and very nice and very helpful, very friendly ... They were just like me”

- Ramesh, gay male 29

Conclusion

The accounts of overseas-born GBM suggest that they may experience different forms of distress when receiving an HIV diagnosis than their Australian-born counterparts. Concerns over the impact of HIV on their visa status, navigating unfamiliar health systems, and limited social networks can exacerbate the challenges in adjusting to living with HIV. Peer support programs can play an important role in helping overseas-born GBM adjust to a positive HIV diagnosis.

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