

PrEP from the bottom up: The role of grassroots advocates in the implementation of PrEP in Australia

Wells, N^{1,2}, Smith, A K J³, Williams C⁴

¹Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney

²Department of General Practice, Monash University

³Centre for Social Research in Health, UNSW Sydney

⁴PrEP'd for Change

Background:

By mobilising grassroots collectives and challenging established ways of working, HIV advocates were instrumental in transforming the landscape of HIV treatment, prevention, and care. Similarly, community advocates have been important in supporting access to HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), but their role in Australia is scarcely documented. This paper explores the role of PrEP advocacy groups in contributing to the rollout of PrEP in Australia.

Methods:

This paper draws on ethnographic observations conducted between November 2017 and July 2018 in Melbourne, and on the social media pages of two Australian-based PrEP advocacy groups. Interviews were conducted with PrEP advocates and researchers ($n=5$), PrEP users ($n=11$), and people living with HIV ($n=4$). Interviews and fieldnotes were analysed with a focus on the role of PrEP advocacy and the implementation of PrEP in Australia.

Results:

Recognising a gap in information about PrEP in Australia, individual gay community members established a digital presence to provide health resources to current and potential PrEP users, share information about demonstration trials, and crowdsource lists of PrEP-prescribing doctors. Advocates were instrumental in establishing a relationship with an overseas pharmacy to facilitate access to generic PrEP medications for those unable to access PrEP through state-based implementation trials. Through social media discussion, advocates shaped how PrEP was used and understood, including an aim of countering stigmatising discourses about PrEP use observed overseas.

Conclusion:

Australian PrEP advocacy groups mobilised community resources, social media, and lay expertise to improve PrEP accessibility and productively shape the Australian rollout and public framing of PrEP. As new PrEP technologies emerge, COVID-19 reshapes patterns of sex and access to healthcare, and as PrEP access continues to be inaccessible for some key populations, the expertise and networks of these groups can be leveraged to sustain PrEP coverage and continue Australia's successful HIV response.

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