

# Prescribing PrEP for 'peace of mind' in the context of serodiscordant relationships: a qualitative analysis of Australian providers' views

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## Background:

Scientific consensus that undetectable equals untransmissible (U=U) means that HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) is not required for an HIV-negative patient when their HIV-positive partner has an undetectable viral load (UVL). However, Australian PrEP guidelines recognise that prescription can be considered when serodiscordant couples experience 'undue suffering' or 'anxiety' about intra-couple HIV transmission, even in the context of UVL. As clinicians have gatekeeper roles in determining who obtains access to PrEP, we conducted qualitative interviews to explore their perspectives on prescribing PrEP in this context.

## Methods

PrEP-experienced doctors and nurses were recruited in NSW and WA between October 2019 and April 2020 for one-hour phone or in-person interviews. Participants (n=25) included general practitioners (n=9), sexual health nurses (n=9), and sexual health physicians (n=7), from NSW (n=17) and WA (n=8). This paper describes key themes about prescribing PrEP for serodiscordant relationships.

## Results:

Participants believed that U=U was effective when antiretrovirals were used appropriately, and therefore saw PrEP as clinically unnecessary for preventing serodiscordant intra-couple transmission in the context of an UVL. However, they saw PrEP as justified if the HIV-negative patient had sexual partners outside the relationship. Participants supported the use of PrEP for alleviating HIV anxiety for either or both partners, although some participants were concerned that prescribing PrEP could undermine the U=U message. A few participants reasoned that prescribing PrEP to the HIV-negative partner could foster a sense of shared responsibility for minimising the risk of transmission within the relationship.

## Conclusion:

This sample of clinicians believed in U=U but also said they would prescribe PrEP to reduce HIV anxiety for serodiscordant couples. Our findings suggest that although clinicians feel that PrEP is unnecessary to prevent intra-couple HIV transmission due to an UVL, clinicians acknowledge and support psychosocial and emotional dynamics in relationships and may use clinical judgment and discretion beyond PrEP prescribing guidelines.

## Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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