



Joint Australasian HIV&AIDS and Sexual Health Conferences 2022

29 August - 1 September 2022
Sunshine Coast Convention Centre

Day 2 recap

The second day of the **Australasian HIV&AIDS and Sexual Health Conference** was the biggest yet! The opening of the Sexual Health Conference focused on the opportunities and challenges posed by various public sexual health issues, ranging from congenital syphilis to new therapeutics and the stigma faced by sex workers.

The HIV&AIDS conference continued with new content across all themes, with a highlight being the future of long-acting injectable PrEP and new insights into the pathophysiology.

Sexual Health Opening Plenary

We once again had the pleasure of Zele Davis welcoming us to these beautiful lands of the Kabi Kabi and Jinibara Peoples, accompanied by Robbie Peters, who treated us to a digeridoo performance and left us with an appreciation for local mud crab and wildflowers!

In the opening address on behalf of the QLD government, [Hon Yvette D'Ath](#) reflected on the efforts of ASHM in expanding clinician education, particularly across the challenging geography of Queensland. Highlighting the challenges ahead, Hon Yvette D'Ath provided an overview of the initiatives and strategies in Queensland focused on sexual health, particularly concentrating on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who continue to be disproportionately affected by BBVs and STIs.

ASHRA co-chair [Angela Dawson](#) congratulated and welcomed ASRHA Oration Distinguished Services Award recipient and keynote speaker [Catherine O'Connor](#), who recounted her illustrious career in sexual health, including rebuilding dismantled sexual health services in a politically challenging environment, being at the forefront of ART for HIV and leading the way for PCR STI testing and PrEP. Catherine is genuinely inspiring and highlights the difference we can make when we work together for change.

Despite STIs being responsible for millions of deaths every year, they have been subject to years of neglect. We were privileged to hear from keynote speaker [Teodora Wi](#) who highlighted the need for a strategic shift in addressing disproportionately affected high-risk groups and populations affected by STIs. Some of the most prominent concerns include increasing infection rates, emerging and re-emerging conditions, and increased antimicrobial resistance. Research, innovation, and collaboration amongst researchers are vital to fostering and supporting a new reality. Strategic shifts are an incredible challenge, but our collective commitment proves that there is hope for the future. Teodora stressed that the most significant and crucial challenge is the need to eliminate stigma. Creating a sex-positive culture where STIs are normalised eliminates shame and stigma and breaks down needless barriers that hinder effective STI elimination.

STIs in pregnancy remains a major problem worldwide, contributing to significant morbidity and mortality for mother and child. Keynote speaker [Lisa Valley](#) provided a brief overview of the current state of knowledge of STIs in pregnancy, highlighting that further research covering epidemiology, the timing of testing and treatment, and consistency in outcome measures is essential to guide future efforts. STI testing, prevention using vaccines, novel treatments, and advocacy for at-risk patients should be a priority for research.

Implementing Long-Acting Injectable PrEP in Australia

It is difficult to convey the impact that PrEP has made since its mostly general availability in Australia. This highly anticipated session covered the opportunities and challenges of a potential paradigm shift from daily oral therapy to periodic injections.

[Benjamin Bavin](#) discussed the potential future of long-acting PrEP, the first of which is long-acting cabotegravir (LA-CAB), which was approved in Australia only a few weeks ago. Benjamin provided a summary of evidence outlining the efficacy of LA-CAB, confirming its ability to reduce the incidence of HIV. Some issues that remain to be fully quantified include the rate of breakthrough infections (which have not been observed to date) and the potential impact of the CAB-LA "tail" - residual cabotegravir that may influence drug resistance.

Several regulatory hurdles need to be overcome when registering new long-acting PrEP in Australia, as [Edwina Wright](#) explained in an overview of the TGA and PBAC's role in bringing innovative new therapies to Australia. Firstly, sponsors have significant financial and data commitments to fulfil the TGA's aim to ensure the efficacy, safety, and quality of medicines in Australia to gain approval. After this, if the company chooses, the PBAC is responsible for determining whether the public is willing to pay for the new therapy. Their decision is underpinned by improved quality of life and cost-effectiveness compared to existing PBS-funded treatments.

Covering the potential practicalities and uptake of long-acting PrEP in general practice, [Darren Russell](#) illustrated that the recent approval of the long-acting injectable HIV treatment Cabenuva (cabotegravir and rilpivirine) in April 2022 has already begun to change perspectives of monthly or bi-monthly therapy for those with HIV. A challenge with injectable therapy is the already stretched capacity of GP and sexual health clinics and their ability to resource administration of injections appropriately. Regarding uptake, Darren conveyed the potential breadth of people who may benefit from LA-CAB PrEP availability, including in at-risk populations where oral uptake is poor and in patients who could face stigma and shame using PrEP.

From a community perspective, [Michael Whelan](#) from PrEPaccessNOW (PAN) surveyed the community to gauge opinions on the potential of long-acting PrEP: reminding delegates that toolkits only work if everyone has access, are aware of what is available, and are willing to benefit from it! Examples of community members who may benefit from long-acting PrEP are those who hide their identity from family or friends, drug users, or those from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Kirby and CSRH Surveillance Reports Launch

In our first look at the Kirby Institutes' *HIV Surveillance Data*, [Skye McGregor](#) revealed that HIV notifications in 2021 have dropped to their lowest rate on record – a 48% reduction since 2021 and a 38% reduction since 2019. An obvious confounding factor is the impact of COVID-19, with apparent aberrations seen in the data over 2020 and 2021. Skye reminded us that while there are positive signs in the data, there is still a long way to go to elimination and that the final stretch towards elimination will be the most difficult.

Presenting an excerpt from the CSRH's *Annual Report of Trends in Behaviour 2022*, [Martin Holt](#) provided insights into testing rates, sexual behaviours, and protection coverage concerning HIV. Like the Kirby report, irregularities were observed in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID, and it will be interesting to observe these changes over time. Concerningly, surveys suggest that more than 3 in 20 healthcare professionals would behave differently toward an individual with HIV; this indicates that there is still more to be done regarding reducing the stigma associated with HIV.

Check out the [CSRH Annual Report](#) and [Kirby Institutes HIV Surveillance report](#), both published and freely available online.

Congenital Syphilis

'*You shouldn't see babies with syphilis in Melbourne in 2020*' was a headline appearing in lay press in response to surging syphilis cases in pregnant women and the associated surge of congenital syphilis. This session provided a fascinating overview of some initiatives to battle the ongoing outbreak.

To present a perspective of the WA response, [Donna Mak](#) and Matthew Bacon covered WA's response to the ninefold increase in syphilis notifications. After reviewing public health case records, WA Health began recommending routine syphilis testing for all pregnant women during antenatal visits. Testing rates are still not high enough, and there may be an issue regarding engagement with the healthcare system. Donna and Matthew highlight the need for consistent antenatal syphilis testing recommendations.

[Mihaela Iva](#) covered the results of a patient-centred care response in Victoria, which recruited 45 pregnant patients with syphilis and allowed them to receive additional care and support, regular appointments, home visits, and partner notifications. The results of this program were positive, with no congenital syphilis cases reported, and supported funding of similar management programs.

The ongoing syphilis outbreak disproportionately affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, with significant increases observed, particularly in young heterosexuals. [Heather McCormack](#) presented the results of changes to an electronic system that increased and streamlined patient STI testing. After one year, health assessments doubled in men aged 15-29, and similar increases were also seen for women. This simple change can potentially increase testing rates and subsequent testing and management of syphilis in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

In research presented by [Palak Gupta](#), switching from an opt-in to an opt-out syphilis testing strategy significantly increased the number of tests for syphilis in antenatal care and suggested that this approach may be a consideration for the management of the ongoing outbreak. Palak highlighted that raising awareness amongst GPs is crucial, and changes to recommendations may prompt early detection and treatment of syphilis before it is allowed to result in congenital syphilis.

Parents in Sexual Health and HIV Education

There are often fierce debates about parents' role in education about sexual health, with this session focusing on the issue by showcasing recent research and practical experiences.

[Tania Ferfolja](#) and [Jacqueline Ullman](#) presented key findings regarding parental perspectives on the inclusion of Gender and Sexual Diversity (GSD) in schools. Results revealed that parents overwhelmingly support GSD inclusion in the school curriculum, and schools do not embed GSD in curricula despite support.

Is there such a thing as 'healthy porn' for young people? In research presented by [Alan McKee](#), a group of experts suggest that 'healthy porn' is porn content that includes diversity, a variety of sexual practices, negotiation of consent, was ethically produced, provides pleasure for all participants, and safe sex. Such content does exist, however, it is difficult to find amongst other offerings.

[Christopher Thorpe](#) outlined Shine SA's work, which aims to support parents' roles in comprehensive relationships and sexuality education. Shine SA works with parents and schools to provide sexual education and highlights the need for resources tailored to specific populations and demographics.

Less is More: Sex Work Laws, Stigma and Public Health

Do you need to choose between working legally or safely? The effective criminalisation of independent sex workers means this is a choice sex workers face every day. In this Affiliate Organisation Session by Respect, ASHM and Scarlet Alliance, the impact of laws against sex work was explored.

Sex worker, advocate, and co-founder of Respect, [Candi Forrest](#), introduced us to the outrageous laws and practices which continue to discriminate against sex workers in Queensland today. Licensing laws, mandated STI testing, criminalisation of working with an STI, legislated discriminative policies, and legal entrapment by police continue to make sex work highly stigmatised.

[Jules Kim](#), CEO of the Scarlet Alliance, expanded on the myths surrounding decriminalising sex work. Jules explained that whilst licensing is touted as 'legalisation', it, in fact, generates a two-tiered industry, where most sex workers are forced to work illegally. Decriminalisation allows for effective regulations to protect sex workers, just like any other industry and removes the need for police enforcement.

[Dylan O'Hara of Vixen](#), Victoria's only peer sex worker organisation, outlined the progress Victoria has made on sex work decriminalisation and its impact on sex workers. Victoria has begun repealing archaic laws criminalising most sex work and will completely dismantle the licensing system by the end of 2023, removing some of the barriers and reducing the stigma faced by Victorian sex workers.

Providing a public health perspective, [Darren Russell](#) began by describing the absurdity of mandatory testing and the required "certificate of attendance" for licenced sex workers who work in brothels. Darren explained that sex workers in Australia have a lower risk of STIs than non-sex workers, and there is no evidence that being a sex worker is a risk factor for having an STI.

Lulu Holiday, sex worker and advocate, concurred with Darren's sentiments: sex workers are capable human beings who make reasonable choices, evident in the low rate of STIs. Allowing sex workers autonomy and providing education will only reinforce good practices and reduce shame and stigma.

Everyone should be allowed to live a life free of stigma and discrimination, and the dismantling of Queensland's antiquated sex worker laws is essential for sex workers.

What to look forward to today

Joint Plenary

Don't miss the Joint HIV and Sexual Health opening plenary, which begins at 9:00 AM with the announcement of the *Levinia Crooks Emerging Leader Award* winner, followed by highly anticipated presentations covering the gamut of HIV and Sexual Health from keynote speakers [Todd Fernando](#), [Valerie Delpech](#), and [Helen Marshall](#).

Quality over Quantity? Going Beyond Viral Suppression in HIV Care

Grab some lunch and join this NAPWHA & Viiv Healthcare Sponsored Satellite Session, which begins at 1:00 PM.

ASHHNA AGM and Session.

The Australasian Sexual Health and HIV Nurses Association (ASHHNA) is hosting their AGM and nurse network session during Lunch at 1:00 PM, followed by a joint nurse session at 2:00. *Expanding nursing scope of practice: meeting the changing needs of communities*.

Posters

Haven't checked out the posters yet? Make some time to browse the wide range of posters and vote for your favourite on the App!

HIV&AIDS closing plenary

Today marks the close of the HIV&AIDS conference, with the closing plenary commencing at 4:00 PM. Join IAS President and International Co-Chair, [Professor Sharon Lewin](#), AO and IAS Co-Chair [Professor Charles Gilks](#), and a panel to discuss the IAS 12th HIV Science Conference – developing a roadmap to Brisbane 2023.

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