Ethical Impact of Social Stigma on Promotion & Use of HIV PrEP Therapy Among MSM

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What is PrEP?

Pre-exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP)
- Tenofovir/emtricitabine disoproxil fumerate (TDF-FTC)
- Truvada (brand name)
- FDA approval (Jul 2012)
- Pre-exposure Prophylaxis Initiative (PrEx) Study
- 44% reduction in Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) infection (all participants)
- 73%-90% reduction among patients with >90% adherence
- PrEP Therapy (Center for Disease Control Guidelines)
- HIV Testing
- Medication adherence counseling
- Behavioral risk reduction support
- Side effect assessment
- Sexually transmitted infection (STI) symptom assessment

PrEP vs. PEP

Pre-exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP)
- Protect yourself from HIV every day
- Prevent HIV after exposure
- “It is a difficult task that one can’t avoid if you are sexually active.”

Post-exposure Prophylaxis (PEP)
- “It is a difficult task that one can’t avoid if you are sexually active.”

Ethical Concerns

- Equal access/social justice
- Side effects (risk vs. benefit of treatment)
- Provider awareness and comfort with PrEP
- Risk compensation/behavioral disinhibition
- Social Stigma associated with PrEP use among men who have sex with men (MSM)

Types of Social Stigma

Anticipated - expected by others
- Internalized - perceived by individuals
- Experienced - felt by individuals

Social process, characterized by exclusion, rejection, blame or devaluation that results from experience, perception or reasonable anticipation of adverse social judgment. (Weiss)

Impact of Social Stigma

Men Who Don’t Have A Regular Doctor Less Likely To Discuss HIV With Providers And Less Likely To Be Tested

Social stigma reinforces barriers to healthcare for MSM

Assumptions regarding MSM and sexual behaviors such as risk compensation (i.e. anal sex without the use of condoms or “barebacking”) reinforce and may exacerbate feelings of social stigma.

- Manifests as anticipated stigma and experienced stigma by MSM patients
- Gay sex is very often stigmatized, can lead providers to make inappropriate judgments.

Internalized Stigma (Amico et al)

- Sexuality and gender identity are stigmatized
- HIV diagnosis is linked to experiences of social isolation
- Internalized stigma can limit healthcare access

Parallels to Women’s Health Movement

Studies related to PrEP and healthcare concerns for LGBT patients show that even an association with HIV/AIDS healthcare providers and researchers presents a barrier.

Smith et al’s work with African American young adults found some participants would avoid conversations and/or opportunities to get on PrEP due to embarrassment it might cause for them with providers. Concern was that taking PrEP could be viewed as an admission of high-risk behaviors.

One research participant shared that he almost skipped attending a focus group out of concern that people would find out his involvement in AIDS research, leading others to suspect he had HIV. (Smith)

Ethical Impact of Social Stigma

Social stigma can negatively impact treatment adherence, patient health, desire, and the quest for balancing health, desire, and autonomy. (Rogers & Balzan)

Studies related to PrEP and healthcare concerns for LGBT patients show that even an association with HIV/AIDS healthcare providers and researchers presents a barrier.

Social Stigma of PrEP as HIV prevention strategy must be addressed and commitment made to eliminate it

Concluding Remarks

Failure to do so contributes to:
- Human suffering
- Limits healthcare access
- Negatively impacts treatment adherence far ranging public health repercussions
- HIV prevention must focus further on providing tailored messages, strategies, and programs that mitigate the potential for social stigma.

Contact Information

Thanks for stopping by, please take a handout.

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References

1. Smith et al
2. Rogers & Balzan

4. Michael Weinstein, President of the AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF), adamantly spoke out in opposition to the use of PrEP therapy, referring to Truvada as a “party drug” and the promotion of it as “a public health disaster in the making.”

5. "One of the largest challenges PrEP faces is that experts have said for decades that condoms are the most effective way to prevent HIV infection. Many of these same doctors and also charities and advocacy groups are very uncomfortable about anything that challenges that message.” — Kenneth Mayer

6. The Fenway Institute
References: