

Qualitative insights in safe and unsafe sexual behaviour among HIV-positive MSM in the Netherlands

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Overview

- Background
- Method
- Results
- Key findings

Background

- Hardly any separate HIV-prevention activities for HIV+ MSM
 - Reasons:
 - Danger of ‘viral apartheid’, stigmatising and criminal penalties
 - The risk that HIV-negative MSM would fail to protect themselves
- (Bayer, 1996)

Predictors of unsafe sex

(Kok, 1998; Schiltz & Sandfort, 2000)

- Younger
- Less educated
- Less sexual control
- More use of alcohol and nitrates
- Low self-efficacy
- Low social support
- **Low feelings of personal responsibility**
- Less supportive personal norms
- Disclosure ?

Targeting HIV+ MSM

- Motivation to protect others more important than motivation to protect oneself
- Central to motivation to protect others:
 - feelings of personal responsibility
- Central to motivation to protect themselves:
 - risk of super infection
 - risk of STD's

Main research questions

1. To what extent are HIV+ MSM motivated to protect others?
2. To what extent are HIV+ MSM motivated to protect themselves?
3. Which other factors are, according to them, related to safe and unsafe sexual behaviour?

Method

Respondents

- 30 HIV+ MSM
- Average age: 44 (range 37-57)
- Average length of time since HIV+ test result: 9 (range 1-19)

Procedure

- Semi-structured interviews
- Range: 90 to 150 minutes
- Recorded and transcribed

Method

Topics addressed

- HIV risk behaviour and protective behaviour
- Experiences with new and steady sex partners
- Personal responsibility
- The risk of super infection and STD's
- Disclosure

Analysis

QRS Nudist 4.0

Sexual behaviour

- Men with steady partner: 11
- Seroconcordant relationships: 7
- Serodiscordant relationships: 4
- Most men reported casual/anonymous sex partners

Motivation to protect others

1. Sole responsibility
2. Shared responsibility
3. No responsibility

(see also Rosengarten, Race & Kippax, 2000)

Motivation to protect others

Sole responsibility

“In my opinion, it is the primary responsibility of the HIV positive person to ensure that safe practices are followed. The person who is HIV positive has the weapon in his hands. Of course, the partner should make the effort to protect himself, but the infected person has the weapon. I think that he is, therefore, responsible for protecting his partner.”

Motivation to protect others

Shared responsibility

“Both partners are, to some extent, responsible for practicing safe sex. Just as an HIV-negative person runs the risk of HIV, the HIV-positive person runs the risk of a weakened defence system if he catches something.”

Motivation to protect others

No responsibility

“It is not my intention to ejaculate in the mouth of my partner, but some men insist on it. In the beginning, I was very careful, but then I thought: why should I be so concerned? I mean, if you see what is going on, people should determine for themselves whether or not they are willing to run the risk. After all, it is their own risk.”

Motivation to protect themselves

- The risk of superinfection seemed to be a less important factor

Reasons:

- Men took the risk for granted

For example

“We knew that we had to be careful because we could infect the other person once more. But then we thought: ‘So what’. We will cross that bridge when we come to it. If we have to die, let us die in a pleasant way. So we didn’t see any reason to change. We will keep doing it [practicing unprotected sex].”

Motivation to protect themselves

- The risk of superinfection seemed to be a less important factor

Reasons:

- Men took the risk for granted
- Men pointed to the lack of empirical evidence
- For a minority the risk of superinfection did play a role

Risk reduction strategies

Seroselection

“I don’t want a relationship with somebody who is HIV negative. Partly out of fear for having sex and the need to protect him [...]. I mean, it is very practical if the other is infected too. You don’t have to deal with the fact that you can transmit the virus to the other person - and then condoms are no longer an issue.”

Risk reduction strategies

Disclosure

“If I meet an attractive person, I always try to communicate one way or the other that I am HIV positive. Then he knows immediately what is going on. When he is sure that he can handle the situation, then he can make the first move.”

Incidents of unsafe sex

- In steady relationships
 - need to be intimate

For example

“He gives me a blow-job once in a while. And he never uses a condom. For me that is frustrating. I don’t want to reject him. And I’m very afraid of refusing him. I mean, you don’t want to hurt your partner. But I have my mind on other things then.”

Incidents of unsafe sex

- In steady relationships
 - Need to be intimate
- In casual/anonymous encounters
 - Feelings of falling in love, intense passion, chance of a lifetime

Communication

- Hardly any explicit communication about safe/unsafe sex
- Most men do not disclose serostatus to casual/anonymous sex partners
“It is very difficult to find someone to have sex with when you tell that you are HIV infected. You’re better off if you don’t say a word.”

Key findings

- Protecting others seemed to play a more important role than protecting themselves in sexual decision making
- Several risk reducing strategies were mentioned, e.g. seroselection and disclosure
- In steady as well as casual/anonymous relationships emotional arguments played an important role in incidents of unsafe sex

Key findings

- In sexual encounters there was hardly any communication about safe and unsafe sex
- Most men reported not to disclose status

Recommendations

- HIV prevention intervention targeting HIV-positive MSM should address the motivation to protect others
- More clarity is needed about the risk of super infection
- HIV+ MSM should be supported in maintaining safe sex and in difficulties disclosing serostatus
- More research is needed on specific determinants