Sexual health behaviours in a sample of people in Australia who regularly inject illicit or non-prescribed drugs, 2023

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Introduction

There is some evidence that engaging in unprotected sex is common among people who inject drugs, potentially exposing them and their partners to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) [1]. Indeed, previous research has found that people who inject drugs are at an increased risk of contracting STIs [2,3] and other blood-borne viruses [3]. However, there is a scarcity of research on the utilisation of sexual health testing and screening services beyond Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Hepatitis B and C (HBV/HCV) within this population. The aim of this bulletin is to describe the sexual health behaviours among a group of PWID interviewed in Australia in 2023.

Methods

Data for the Illicit Drugs Reporting System (IDRS) were collected through annual interviews with residents of Australian capital cities aged ≥18 who reported injecting illegal and/or non-prescribed drugs ≥6 days in the past 6 months [4]. Participants were mainly recruited through needle and syringe programs (NSP), peer-based harm reduction services and 'word-of-mouth. Participants reported on specific sexual health behaviours during defined time periods. In 2023, a total of 820 participants were surveyed.

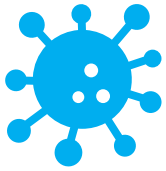
Results

Among those who responded (n=788), 47% had engaged in any kind of sexual activity in the last 4 weeks.

Among those who had engaged in past month sexual activity (n=370), participants reported a median of 1 sexual partner (IQR: 1-2).

Among those who responded (n=786), 64% reported a lifetime sexual health check-up (24% in the past six months), excluding an HIV/HCV test.

Among those who reported a lifetime check-up and responded (n=502), 27% had ever been diagnosed with an STI (3% in the past six months).



Among those who had ever had an HIV test and responded (85%; n=669), 3% had been diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime.

Among those who were assigned female at birth and responded (n=248), 89%* reported a lifetime screening test or a pap smear.

*2% Not applicable as have never been sexually active or don't have a cervix

Discussion

Gaining a better understanding of sexual health behaviours among PWID may offer insights into future intervention opportunities, health prevention measures, and campaigns. Approximately one quarter of the sample had undergone a sexual health check-up in the past 6 months, of which approximately one quarter reported at least one diagnosis of an STI in their lifetime. These findings highlight the necessity of implementing sexual health prevention programs and information campaigns targeting PWID to promote sexual health screening tests. Such efforts aim to enhance sexual health by preventing transmission of STIs, bloodborne viruses and reducing incidence of cervical cancer.

References

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