

Is this another phase of HIV denialism?: PrEP rollout as an HIV intervention for those in need

Almost 2500 of young women and girls are infected each week in South Africa, this has led me to wonder further how much indeed are we thinking around PrEP in South African? Or if South Africa is in PrEP denial as an HIV intervention for those in need? Is this repeat of the HIV treatment denialism era of the 2000s? South Africa has the home of PrEP clinical trials and demonstration projects and scale up plans. More so, the ICASA 2017 conference theme, Ending AIDS Delivering Differently, made to concentrate more on what this conference is discussing around PrEP.

Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis an ARV based prevention intervention has been found to be effective in preventing infection among those vulnerable to HIV^{1,2}. PrEP in South Africa has been under discussion among civil society, department of health and other stakeholders for many years now. November 2010 changed the HIV prevention scenario with the exciting (PrEP) results from the iPrEX study conducted in Cape Town and other five sites globally. Even though, PrEP was still labelled for treatment purposes only, the South African Clinicians Society put together the MSM PrEP Guidelines to assist those who might need to prescribe PrEP off label and offer to those who might need it for prevention purposes³. The excitement propelled imminent labelling Tenofovir (TDF) and Emtricitabine (FTC) better known as Truvada and used for prevention by the USA Food and Drug Agency in 2012⁴. By the end of 2015 the Medicine Control Council of South Africa had regulated Truvada to be prescribed for prevention purposes⁵.

Recently the South African Department of Health and members of the civil society participated in an UNAIDS and UNFPA joint meeting in Geneva. The objective of the meeting was to have a strong voice around Global Coalition on HIV prevention⁶. This meeting proposed using a combination prevention intervention, including both social-behavioural and biomedical interventions, with prioritization of key and vulnerable populations. Countries should be able to reduce new infections by 75% before 2020⁷. South Africa's target would be to cut down new HIV infections by 80 000 per year.

South Africa doesn't have a choice between treatment and prevention. Whilst many advancements have been made in treatment, the same amount of work is needed to reduce the continuous rise in HIV incidence. Men-who-have-Sex-with-Men (MSM), Sex workers and Adolescents, Young Women and Girls contribute to a daily HIV infection rate of between 2000 and 2500 people.^{8, 9, 10} Clearly, this requires radical intervention. The time to enhance the South African response to HIV Prevention is now.

After the Medicines Control Council approval of PrEP for HIV prevention, the South African National Department of Health (NDoH) began 17 PrEP demonstration projects, with support from the US National Institute of Health, the Global Fund and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and in 27 priority districts through the PEPFAR DREAMS project¹¹. These

demonstration projects offered Truvada-based PrEP to MSM and Sex Workers . PrEP has been introduced in universities to target young people. At the ICASA 2017 conference, Unitaid in collaboration with the South African NDoH and the WITS Reproductive Health and HIV Institute launched a US\$10,6 million (R143 million) project to provide a comprehensive HIV prevention package (which would include Truvada-based PrEP) to over 6000 girls in South Africa¹².

At the ICASA 2017 Conference, the NDoH presented PrEP uptake so far in South Africa. PrEP was commenced in June 2016 among Sex Workers. Since then, about 41 518 people were tested for HIV; with 36 081 (86%) Sex Workers testing HIV negative. Of these, 22 890 (63%) were offered PrEP; but only 2716 (7.5%) were initiated on PrEP. There is a similar low rate of PrEP use among MSM, where 3914 had HIV tests, 3708 (95%) were HIV negative. Only 1436 (39%) were offered PrEP and 616 (17%) were initiated on PrEP. Uptake is even worse among young people in universities. In October 2017, PrEP was offered to all university students at the major universities in South Africa. Of the 1588 students who were HIV negative, 1436 were offered PrEP (90%) and just 11 (0.6%) students were initiated on PrEP. The uptake of PrEP remains very low in South Africa.

What can be done to increase the uptake of PrEP? Clearly there is a problem of social acceptability and uptake of PrEP in South Africa. .So far, only just over 3000 individuals are on PrEP. With the HIV incidence rate on the rise, it is worthwhile for the NDoH to provide more robust socio-demographic data on PrEP usage. This will assist advocates, policymakers and other stakeholders on where and how their PrEP efforts should be focused. While PrEP knowledge in South Africa is lacking, we have access different social and electronic platforms where PrEP information could be shared widely.

A lot still needs to be considered before national roll out of PrEP in South Africa. There are adequate funds, with the partners mentioned above, for national roll-out of PrEP, however social acceptability research through in-depth communication platforms and enhanced meetings is required to create an understanding on PrEP among South Africa, before PrEP will be taken up. Collaboration of all stakeholders: advocates, researchers, policy makers and PrEP end users, is needed right now. Perhaps South Africa may start understanding and accept PrEP... and meet the goal of a 70% reduction in new HIV infections by 2020.

¹ "Towards a global HIV prevention coalition and road map - unaids."
http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/towards-global-HIV-prevention-coalition-and-road-map_en.pdf. Accessed 12 Dec. 2017.

² "WHO | Publications on Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)."
<http://www.who.int/hiv/pub/prep/en/>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2017.

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- ³ "Southern African guidelines for the safe use of pre-exposure"
<http://www.sajhivmed.org.za/index.php/hivmed/article/view/136/225>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2017.
- ⁴ "Truvada for PrEP Fact Sheet: Enduring Safe and Proper Use - FDA." 16 Jul. 2012,
<https://www.fda.gov/downloads/Drugs/DrugSafety/PostmarketDrugSafetyInformationforPatientsandProviders/UCM312290.pdf>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2017.
- ⁵ "South African Medicines Control Council approves tenofovir/FTC for" <http://i-base.info/htb/29570>.
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- ⁶ "Towards a global HIV prevention coalition and road map - unaids."
http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/towards-global-HIV-prevention-coalition-and-road-map_en.pdf. Accessed 12 Dec. 2017.
- ⁷ "Health Sector HIV Prevention - National Department of Health."
<http://www.health.gov.za/index.php/component/phocadownload/category/324-hiv-prevention-strategy?download=1823:hiv-prevention-strategy>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2017.
- ⁸ "Health Sector HIV Prevention - National Department of Health."
<http://www.health.gov.za/index.php/component/phocadownload/category/324-hiv-prevention-strategy?download=1823:hiv-prevention-strategy>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2017.
- ⁹ "Sex workers, HIV and AIDS | AVERT." <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-social-issues/key-affected-populations/sex-workers>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2017.
- ¹⁰ "HIV prevention and treatment for South African men who have sex with"
<http://www.samj.org.za/index.php/samj/article/view/5116/3539>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2017.
- ¹¹ "PrEPWatch: Home." <https://www.prepwatch.org/>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2017.
- ¹² "SA launches R143m HIV prevention project among young women" 6 Dec. 2017, <http://citypress.news24.com/News/sa-launches-r143m-hiv-prevention-project-among-young-women-20171206>.
Accessed 12 Dec. 2017.