Impact of COVID pandemic among Men who have sex with Men living with HIV during lockdown in Argentina

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Background:

The Argentinean government established an early enforced lockdown to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Risk for severe illness from COVID-19 among people living with HIV (PLWH) has not been established yet. However, it is known they are at increased risk for mental health complications. This cohort study examines the impact of COVID-related stress and enforced lockdown on treatment adherence and mental health among men who have sex with men living with HIV (MSMLWH) in Argentina.

Methods:

Participants were PLWH enrolled in a private/social security clinic network, the largest provider for HIV healthcare in Argentina. They completed an anonymous online survey which assessed adherence to HIV treatment, COVID-19 prevention behavior, disruptions to resources, psychosocial factors, and substance use. For this analysis we focused on MSMLWH outcomes.

Results:

A total of 1336 participants (892 men and 444 women), aged between 18-82 years, residing mostly in Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (94.1%) completed the online survey. Among men, 596 participants self-reported as men who have sex with men with a median age of 44 years (35-52).

MSM reported high adherence to lockdown (96.8%), loss of employment in their household (55.4%), difficulty in obtaining basic necessities such as food or clothing (36.6%) and 27.2% reported challenges to access internet-delivered medical services. Disruption in obtaining non-HIV medication was reported by 7.7% of the subjects, and 4.9% in the case of HIV medication; 29.9% reported suboptimal adherence.

Mental health challenges were frequent: depression (14.1%), loneliness (15.6%) and anxiety (20.2%). Abuse (sexual, emotional or physical) was reported by 6.5%. Additionally, 13.1% reported an increase in their alcohol consumption.

Conclusion:

High adherence to prevention measures was reported among MSMLWH at the beginning of the lockdown. However, it challenged the access to health services and may have impacted on medication adherence. COVID-19 pandemic has significantly deteriorated the country’s economy, and our study shows its impact on MSMLWH access to resources. Lockdown and COVID-stress have also affected MSMLWH’s emotional health. Our study highlights the importance of strengthening HIV healthcare services to promote treatment adherence and mental health support during COVID pandemic, especially in lockdown periods.

References: