Evaluating the Attitudes of Men who Have Sex with Men in Asia towards PrEP Use
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Cover Photo: The presentation of the "Attitudes of Men who Have Sex with Men in Asia towards PrEP Use" survey in PrEParing Asia (APCOM, 2015)
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# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Survey</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes among Self-Reported Condom Users</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes among Those who Reported to not Consistenly Use Condoms</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Desire for PrEP</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons for not Wanting to Use PrEP</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving Forward</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Asia, the HIV epidemic among men who have sex with men (MSM) has intensified, with high infection rates, particularly in urban centers. Within this context, Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) has emerged as an additional tool with the potential to help local and global efforts reach prevention targets. HIV service providers are ready and eager to provide PrEP to those at high risk and pilot projects within the region are already looking to scale up to the national level.

Despite the high hopes that this new tool brings to the fight against HIV, there remains much work to be done, not only in terms of increasing access and improving delivery systems, but also in terms of public outreach among potential users. Overall, there is a general gap in terms of knowledge and information regarding how PrEP is viewed and understood within MSM communities. APCOM, along with its network partners, is committed to helping fill these gaps.

**BACKGROUND**

This report is the culmination of a survey conducted by APCOM to assess the attitudes and practices towards PrEP use among MSM in Asia. The survey was conducted from July to August 2015, prior to PrEParing Asia – the region’s first community-led dialogue in PrEP roll out, organised by APCOM on 23rd to 25th of September. The survey questionnaires were designed based on the MSMGF global survey, with input from PrEP technical and steering committees. Purposeful sampling was conducted through APCOM’s network, social media and website. While potential selection bias should be acknowledged, the data nonetheless presents insight that may be helpful in guiding future actions.

**THE SURVEY**

In total, 228 individuals were surveyed. All of the individuals surveyed fall under the purview of MSM. Individuals came from 17 different countries, all within Asia, with an average age of 30. The majority of those surveyed were university educated, HIV negative, sexually active, and having a range of one to five sexual partners over the past six months. Informants were not currently taking PrEP.

Of those surveyed, half reported being in a relationship, while the other half reported being single. Furthermore, half reported consistent condom use, while the other half reported that they either sometimes used condoms, or rarely used condoms at all.
The survey discovers findings that distinguish the attitudes towards PrEP among the respondents who use condom consistently and that of those who use condom inconsistently, as well as conclusions on undesirability of PrEP among some respondents.

One of the main concerns surrounding the incorporation of PrEP as a prevention tool is the idea that PrEP may supplant condom use. Within our survey, 72% of consistent condom users were aware of PrEP, while 66% indicated a desire to take PrEP. Furthermore, only 23% reported that they would stop using condoms if they were to take PrEP.

Around 58% of those surveyed were aware that PrEP only prevents against HIV infection and does not offer protection from other STIs. 42%, however, were unaware. This demonstrates the imperative that information and knowledge surrounding PrEP be made readily available, so as to assure that PrEP not be misconstrued as a one-stop all-inclusive safe-sex drug, but rather be seen as an additional tool to be understood and used in conjunction with other safe-sex practices.
Attitudes among Those who Reported to not Consistently Use Condoms

While half of those surveyed reported inconsistent condom use, the majority of individuals within this category indicated the use of other preventative strategies, such as:

- Asking a partner’s HIV status
- Getting tested with their partner
- Negotiating a monogamous relationship
- Establishing an open relationship, while agreeing to use condoms with partners outside of the established relationship
- Deciding to only engage in lower risk sexual practices with partners of unknown HIV status, such as mutual masturbation or oral sex
- Only performing insertive, as opposed to receptive, anal sex when having unprotected sex with a partner of unknown HIV status

Of the over 100 individuals who reported inconsistent condom use, only 21 were not currently in a monogamous relationship. 86% of inconsistent condom users who were not currently in a monogamous relationship indicated an awareness of PrEP, with 71% expressing a desire and willingness to take PrEP. This data demonstrates that not only are those who stand to benefit the most from PrEP aware of its existence, but that there is a strong demand among MSM communities for this new prevention tool.

The Desire for PrEP

While PrEP may not be for everyone, it represents a new prevention tool that should be made available to those who stand to benefit from incorporating it into their own personal preventative strategies. Those who expressed a desire to use PrEP were also asked their primary reason for interest. Many respondents expressed a desire to further reduce their risk, with a substantial amount of individuals referring specifically to a desire to reduce their anxiety surrounding the possibility of infection. Others reported their partner’s inconsistent condom use as the primary reason for interest in PrEP. A substantial proportion of respondents also self-identified as engaging in high-risk behaviors for HIV infection and stated these behaviors as their primary desire to use PrEP.

These responses attest to the fact that PrEP, in addition to serving as a preventative tool, may also play a role in terms of personal empowerment, allowing individuals to overcome the anxiety caused by the epidemic and to take charge of their own sexual health. A large number of respondents suggested that access to PrEP would enable them to enjoy sex with less anxiety, feel more in control, and feel good about protecting themselves and others.

Reasons for not Wanting to Use PrEP

Among those who were undecided/unwilling to use PrEP, the two most common reasons stated were that respondents either did not see themselves as being at risk, or that they were concerned with potential side effects. Others stated a preference for other preventative strategies as their primary reason for not wanting to use PrEP. A large number of respondents also stated concerns about cost and access.
Other concerns that were ranked with relatively high significance were:

- Concerns about remembering to take the pill everyday
- Concerns regarding pills not working
- Concerns regarding having to attend regular appointments for testing

Also significant, but with a larger degree of variation from individual to individual were:

- The individual’s own negative thoughts and judgments about the use of PrEP
- Worry and concern over the way the individual may be perceived or judged for using PrEP

The significance of these various concerns highlights the work that is still needed in order to make PrEP an acceptable and readily available prevention tool. This includes disseminating clinical knowledge surrounding the drug itself, while also addressing sociopolitical and economic factors. We need to consider how delivery services can be improved, while also considering what needs to be done in order to create enabling environments where PrEP is not only affordable, but can also be seen as a socially acceptable tool for incorporation amongst any given individuals sexual health regimen.

Moving Forward

While heterosexual HIV transmission in the region is strongly declining, the epidemic has continued unabated among MSM. Current prevention strategies have been inadequate and have failed to reverse infection rates among MSM. PrEP works and is highly effective, particularly at preventing HIV transmission through anal sex. PrEP, along with condoms, can serve as an additional tool for prevention. It also offers a new preventive option to those who don’t manage to use condoms consistently.

While PrEP is not for everyone, it can be an option for people most at risk of HIV. If MSM most at risk are able to self identify, access accurate information and accessible services, they are more likely to adhere to PrEP and effectively incorporate it into their lives as an additional protective practice. Creating an environment where PrEP can be accessed, not just as a pill, but also as part of a service package complete with follow-ups and regular testing. Its will allow individuals to capitalize upon the promises PrEP brings, carrying with it the potential to help bring down infection rates among MSM, all while cutting the cost of life-long care and treatment through investment in a more comprehensive prevention portfolio.

The results of this survey demonstrate that while there is an interest and demand for PrEP, significant work still needs to be done in terms of establishing systems that provide easy affordable access to both information and the drug itself. The data collected in this survey and raised in this report should be used to inform advocacy, as organizations move forward to craft their messaging and push for scale-ups.
We are united in our courage to advocacy issues that affect the lives of men who have sex with men and transgender people, including HIV, rights, health and well being.