Recently HIV-diagnosed gay men’s accounts of the occasion at which they believe they acquired HIV

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Introduction

A minority of gay and bisexual men (GBM) recently diagnosed with HIV are not able to identify a high-risk event to account for their HIV infection. This paper examines men’s descriptions of the event during which they believe they acquired HIV, and the implications for behavioural surveillance.

Method

The HIV Seroconversion Study includes an online survey of people in Australia who have recently been diagnosed with HIV in which survey participants are asked about the event/s they believe led to their infection. Between 2007 and 2013, 441 GBM described an occasion of sex as being the high-risk event (HRE) that they believe led to their HIV infection.

Results

In response to initial survey questions about their sexual practices at the HRE, 322 men (73.0%) reported condomless anal intercourse (CLAI). In subsequent free-text responses, an additional 38 men reported CLAI at the HRE while 21 reported CLAI with casual partners in the six months prior to diagnosis. With some probing, a total of 379 (85.9%) men reported CLAI prior to their diagnosis, including 298 (67.6%) who reported receptive CLAI. While a further 48 (11.0%) men reported behaviours that may have put them at risk of infection, such as oral sex in the presence of open wounds. 14 (3.2%) men could offer no explanation for their seroconversion.

Conclusions

These data suggest that simple surveillance tools may not always capture accurate information on routes of HIV transmission. In the context of contemporary risk reduction, sophisticated surveillance tools are required that collect detailed behavioural information. Some men may require prompting, with sensitive and detailed investigation in order to obtain greater detail and accuracy in their responses.

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