

‘THE SECRECY IS IMMENSE’: EXPERT VIEWS ON ENGAGING HETEROSEXUALLY-IDENTIFIED MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN WITH SEXUAL HEALTH PROMOTION AND CARE

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Background: HIV prevention and testing services are well established in New South Wales (NSW) for men who have sex with men (MSM) who identify as gay or bisexual. However, the sexual health promotion needs of heterosexually-identified MSM (straight MSM), and opportunities to engage this sub-group with services, are less clear. Almost no Australian research exists on straight MSM and the international literature is scant and context specific. This study aimed to provide pilot information on the likely sexual health promotion needs and preferences of these men by firstly documenting expert views.

Methods: Between Nov 2015 and Feb 2016, semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty clinical, health promotion, research and community/advocacy professionals who had some engagement with or expertise regarding straight MSM in NSW.

Results: Participants viewed straight MSM as comprising multiple, intersecting sub-groups, including men who are ‘culturally straight’ due to community, family, or religious beliefs, and those who are ‘hetero-flexible’ in identifying strongly as heterosexual but occasionally having sex with men for fun or a desire for particular practices. In addition to their diversity, straight MSM were described as sharing a strong preference for services which promise ‘discretion’ and ‘confidentiality’, as many are very concerned about keeping this aspect of their sexual lives distinct from their family, work and community lives. The effective, long-term engagement of men with sexual health services and information was also seen to require that clinicians and messaging do not presume an alignment between gay identity and sex with men.

Conclusion: This exploratory study provides initial evidence of the complexities of responding to the needs and preferences of straight MSM. Documenting the views of men themselves would strengthen understanding of how to effectively adapt the design of health promotion and care to better engage men who identify as straight and have sex with men.

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