HIV PrEP: raise awareness in all groups who could benefit and provide for both on and offline access
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Re: Could the use of digital services improve the provision of HIV PrEP in the UK?

Digital services are already integral parts of care pathways for people accessing PrEP in many parts of the UK and considerable research is underway. Many services offered some elements of PrEP care online pre-2020, which enabled rapid transition to predominately hybrid online/telephone-based PrEP care during the Covid-19 pandemic.[1,2] Research presented at a recent national conference showed the acceptability of online PrEP services such as Brighton’s PrEP EmERGE,[3] and the Scottish ePrEP clinic.[4,5]

A wider issue is PrEP adherence and retention: almost 50% of people initiating PrEP are no longer taking it at one year and people prescribed PrEP who acquire HIV are more likely to have drug resistance with reduced treatment options.[6] Online care may not be straightforward for all and appropriate support is needed. Of note, the WHO guidance to reduce renal monitoring was aimed at resource-poor settings and acknowledged that resource-rich settings would continue with baseline creatinine/eGFR. In-person attendance enables holistic sexual health care including comprehensive STI screening, renal monitoring, vaccination and other risk reduction strategies. Many potential online PrEP clinic users value an initial face-to-face appointment.[4]

People who could benefit from PrEP include those who have never tested for HIV and people with considerable PrEP knowledge. We need to accommodate this diversity, balancing “light touch” with safe prescribing. Rather than a sole focus on digital, we need to scale up PrEP coverage and engage a wider range of people with all HIV prevention tools to achieve HIV transmission elimination.[7,8] Digital services play a key part in providing choice for people accessing PrEP but a degree of health and digital literacy are needed to use an online system safely. Crucially, we must raise awareness of PrEP in all groups who could benefit and provide acceptable options for accessing wider STI/HIV prevention, including PrEP, both on and offline.

References


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