

The use of Viagra by gay men

Findings from the QUICKIE project for HIV educators and other health professionals

Background

Sexually active gay men in Sydney were interviewed in 2007 and 2008 about a range of topics, including their use of licit and illicit substances. During analysis of men's accounts of condom use, drug use and sexual activity, it was noted that a number of men described using Viagra to maintain condom use and/or counteract the adverse effects of illicit drugs on erectile function. None of the men in the QUICKIE project had been prescribed Viagra to treat erectile dysfunction. All the men who described using Viagra or similar drugs were therefore reporting what would be regarded as 'recreational' or non-prescribed use.

Viagra and prophylactic certainty

The majority of accounts of Viagra use by participants were overwhelmingly positive. In particular, men emphasised how useful it was in compensating for difficulties in gaining or maintaining an erection when using condoms:

'[Y]ou're having to roll that bloody thing [condom] on, and a lot of times you can't stay hard by the time you've done it—hence Viagra. Viagra has been a godsend to the gay community.'
(*Sam, 43, HIV-negative*)

'I think it [Viagra] means you can have sex for much longer ... very useful for safe sex. You don't have concern that you are not going to be able to keep the erection.'
(*Ron, 46, HIV-negative*)

Viagra was valued by these men because it appeared to guarantee erectile performance and because they felt it made it easier to use condoms. For gay men, like heterosexual men, the guarantee of erectile performance

may be highly valued because it protects men against the feelings of inadequacy associated with impotence and the anxieties of performing sexually on demand. Participants appeared to describe an erectile imperative—that they should be able to initiate and sustain an erection when required—and Viagra provided them with a way to meet this expectation.

Viagra and similar drugs were also valued for their ability to support condom use. The majority of men in the QUICKIE study remained highly committed to the use of condoms for anal sex, but many experienced problems in using condoms, such as losing their erection when putting on a condom, reduction in sensitivity and problems in maintaining an erection when wearing a condom. These problems may be common among men who use condoms but are seldom acknowledged. Viagra therefore appeared to offer prophylactic certainty—the ability to sustain an erection when using a condom—and therefore the ability to sustain safe sex.

Viagra and illicit drugs

Men in the QUICKIE study also described how Viagra could offset the temporary flaccidity associated with the use of alcohol or illicit drugs:

'I think the use of Viagra and those sort of stimulants, I think it's much more common than it used to be ... and I think there's an acceptance also of using it in terms of drugs, that in the past the drugs would give you drug dick whereas now you don't need to worry about it, just take Viagra.'

(*Barclay, 42, HIV-negative*)

Barclay suggests that it has become accepted to use Viagra to offset the erectile problems associated with illicit drugs. There is a neat, pharmaceutical logic to this type of account: Why not take a drug like Viagra to solve the erectile problems caused by other drugs? This makes perfect sense in a culture where drugs are increasingly seen as the 'natural' solution to diverse problems. However, others acknowledged that the circumstances under which Viagra is used by gay men are not always ideal for making decisions about safe sex:

'[Y]ou take a Viagra, you are hard enough to fuck with a condom, there is not that temptation of wanting to not have a condom, and you add drugs on top of that, and amphetamines are notorious for killing erections, and plus your judgment becomes clouded on drugs, so you are now hard enough to fuck, but you are not going to be tempted to do it without a condom ...'

(Ben, 41, HIV-negative)

Ben acknowledges that being able to have penetrative sex while intoxicated (a situation enabled by Viagra) is a condition in which one's ability to assess the safety or risk of that situation could be impaired and that, for various reasons including difficulties with condoms, men may be 'tempted' to have unprotected sex. Rather than providing a neat, pharmaceutical solution, Viagra may in fact complicate the decisions gay men have to make about sexual safety, or risk, by extending the period of time they can engage in penetrative sex, particularly when they use stamina-enhancing illicit drugs.

Conclusions

- Gay men value Viagra because it appears to guarantee erectile performance, assists in maintaining condom use and offsets erectile problems caused by alcohol and illicit drugs.

- Gay men's descriptions of why they use Viagra reveal common problems with using condoms that may have been neglected.
- Gay men may be motivated to use Viagra to sustain condom use but the situations under which Viagra is used (e.g. when intoxicated or using illicit drugs) may be less than ideal for making clear decisions about safe sex.
- Viagra is seen by some gay men as a simple, pharmaceutical solution to the challenge of sustaining condom use but it may in fact make decisions about safe sex more complicated.
- Gay men appear poorly informed about Viagra's potential side effects, contraindications and ability to facilitate unsafe as well as safe sex.

About the project

The Qualitative Interviews Concerning Key Issues and Experiences (QUICKIE) project was a qualitative study that investigated key aspects of gay men's lives in Sydney, including sex, relationships, community engagement and HIV. The project provided a way to contextualise issues identified in behavioural research and to identify emergent issues of relevance to gay men. Participants were sexually active HIV-negative and HIV-positive gay men living in Sydney, New South Wales. Thirty-one men aged between 20 and 71 were interviewed in 2007 and 29 men aged between 21 and 73 took part in 2008. Twenty-four of the men interviewed in 2007 were also interviewed in 2008. Sexual activity, condom use, safe-sex practice and the use of licit and illicit substances were topics covered in both years. All names attributed to participants are pseudonyms.

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Further information

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