

EDITORIAL

VULNERABILITY AND HIV

In Brazil, the epidemic of acquired immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is of predominantly sexual transmission and concentrates on key populations at high risk of exposure to HIV (with estimated prevalence higher than 5%), including injection drug users, sex workers, and men who have sex with men (MSM). The MSM population presents high risk of HIV exposure, influenced by sexual behavior characteristics and context variables such as substance use, stigma and discrimination. Also regarded as a population more vulnerable to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, patients with mental disorders have received little attention regarding the prevention of these conditions. Among the factors that potentially explain the pronounced vulnerability of these populations to HIV are limited knowledge and perception of risk, stigma, discrimination, violence, and unprotected sexual practices, in addition to the high prevalence of licit or illicit drug use. It should be noted, moreover, that the proportions of people living with HIV/Aids who do not undergo HIV testing and who fail to adhere to anti-retroviral therapy are high, showing limitations in access and continuity of care in the healthcare offered to this group. Late onset of treatment impacts on mortality, incidence of opportunistic infections, circulation of drug-resistant strains of HIV and, mainly, in the transmission of HIV to partners.

A response from the federal, state, and municipal governments is urgently needed so that more concentrated efforts are made to assess the extent of the epidemic among key populations and to expand the provision of adequate services, removing barriers to the access to testing and treatment. The development of more effective programs is also imperative to stimulate HIV-preventive behaviors among these populations and to ensure more integrated actions among specialized services.

Corroborating the state of affairs outlined here, in this issue, three articles present results of the nation-wide multicenter study with MSM held in 10 cities, focusing on the city of Belo Horizonte, and two articles present results of the project PESSOAS, held on a nation-wide sample of users of 26 mental health services, whose main objective was to determine the prevalence of HIV infection, syphilis, and hepatitis C. The results found in this set of articles reveal serious challenges to be faced in the context of public health for monitoring and evaluating the HIV epidemic. These studies can offer subsidies for implementing policies that are can address the problem and become successful in providing the adequate actions required for these most vulnerable populations.

In this perspective, the dissemination of knowledge produced by these two studies seeks to promote a much-needed debate about individual, institutional, and social aspects related to vulnerability in its various expressions and intensities in the context of the HIV epidemic.

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