How curing HIV could influence stigma: A qualitative analysis of men who have sex with men in Guangzhou, China

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Introduction

• HIV-related stigma and discrimination have been identified as major barriers to HIV control, prevention and social engagement
• HIV Stigma associated with men who have sex with men (MSM) living with HIV is heavily entrenched in China, in part due to their status as HIV-infected and in part because of their MSM identity

Research objective: To examine perceptions of HIV cure research among MSM living with HIV and its potential impact on existing and future stigma and discrimination in China.

Methods

Study site: Guangzhou, the third largest city in China

Pilot study

Participant recruitment

Data collection

Interview questions were tested and adapted

From an infectious diseases hospital and an LGBT organization in the city

In-depth interview with 26 MSM living with HIV

Analysis

A code-based methodology

Stigma theory1 and review2 was adapted for coding

Applied software: NVivo 11

Results

26 MSM living with HIV

• Most of the men were young, in their 20s
• Participants reported feelings of inferiority, experiences of being excluded both by family and society, workplace discrimination, and psychological distress
• Two unique themes related to HIV cure emerged

Positive effect of an HIV cure on reducing HIV-related stigma

• Curing HIV would reduce fear of HIV and people living with HIV (PLHIV)
• Being cured of HIV would remove stigma that currently serves a barrier to social engagement for PLHIV
• The reduction of HIV-related stigma would lead to improved quality of life and a return to normalcy

Limited impact of an HIV cure on MSM-related stigma

• An HIV cure would do little to change MSM-related stigma
• MSM-related stigma was linked to traditional morality, stereotypes of promiscuity, and high rates of STDs in the MSM community
• These views would persist even after a cure

Discussion

• MSM living with HIV in our study believed that HIV cure may reduce HIV-related stigma. While there was optimism and consensus as to an HIV cure’s effect on HIV-related stigma, participants were far more pessimistic about its potential impact on MSM-related stigma.
• Biomedical advances alone will not alleviate marginalization of MSM in the Chinese context. Intervention to decrease HIV stigma are needed.
• Ongoing and future biomedical HIV cure research may benefit from paired social science research to better understand HIV stigma.

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References