

Predictors of frequent use of amphetamine type stimulants among HIV-negative gay men in Sydney, Australia

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Abstract

Background: Rates of use of amphetamine type stimulants among gay men have raised questions about the role of these drugs in increases in HIV infections and risk behaviour, but the role risk behaviours play with regard to illicit drug use within this population has not been investigated.

Method: Health in men (HIM) is a cohort of 1427 HIV-negative men in Sydney, Australia. All participants undergo annual face-to-face interviews. We examined onset of use of methamphetamine and of ecstasy (MDMA) after their baseline interview.

Results: Among baseline non-frequent users who completed an annual follow-up interview, 67 commenced at least weekly use of ecstasy, while 71 commenced at least weekly use of methamphetamine. Factors independently associated with commencing more frequent use of these drugs included being younger, greater involvement in gay social life, and having engaged in unprotected anal intercourse with casual partners.

Conclusions: The transition from non- or less-frequent drug use to more frequent drug use may be associated with changes in sexual behaviour. While it may be true that illicit drug use leads to unsafe sexual behaviour, it is equally true that illicit drugs are used to enhance sexual performance and pleasure. The relationship is bidirectional and complex and must be understood within the contexts of particular sexual sub-cultural practices: engaging in sexual risk behaviour may be an indicator of future drug use as much as the reverse.

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1. Introduction

Illicit drug use among gay men occurs at rates considerably higher than among similar populations of heterosexual men (McCabe et al., 2003; King et al., 2003; Lampinen et al., 2006; Pitts et al., 2006; Bolding et al., 2006; Prestage et al., 2007). In several studies of gay men, illicit drug use in general has been found to be associated with unprotected anal intercourse with casual partners—UAIC (Koblin et al., 2003; Strathdee et al., 1998; Woody et al., 1999; Rusch et al., 2004), and, in some studies (Darrow et al., 2005; Bolding et al., 2006), this was particularly true of amphetamine type stimulants. In some instances, illicit drug use in general has also been associated with HIV

seroconversion (Chesney et al., 1998; Difrancesco et al., 1996) as has the use of amphetamine type stimulants in particular (Buchacz et al., 2005; Boddiger, 2005).

The extent to which illicit drug use influences sexual risk behaviour among gay men remains a key question, and one that has been the subject of considerable debate (Clatts et al., 2005; Halkitis et al., 2001; Worth and Rawstorne, 2005; Smith et al., 2004; Slavin, 2004; Buchacz et al., 2005; Boddiger, 2005). The research has been beset by problems in consistency of terminology, differences in the drugs examined, poor adjustment for confounding variables, and a reliance on cross-sectional research (Drumright et al., 2006). This problem makes it difficult to tease apart the possible explanations for a complex and multilayered problem.

Colfax et al. (2004) found that use of cocaine, amphetamines and ‘poppers’ was significantly related to unprotected anal intercourse between men who were not HIV sero-concordant, while other studies have reported no connection between illicit drug

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use and UAIC (Gillmore et al., 2002; Weatherburn et al., 1993). In Australia, data from a cohort study of gay men from 1993 to 1997 found that the use of illicit drugs in general was significantly higher among seroconverters than their counterparts. Nonetheless, illicit drug use was *not* independently associated with HIV seroconversion, after controlling for other factors such as age, being in a relationship with an HIV-positive partner, and engagement in a range of esoteric sex practices (Kippax et al., 1998). Illicit drug use in general *was*, however, independently associated with more frequent UAIC (Van De Ven et al., 1998). Use of illicit drugs in general was also associated with being younger and being more sexually involved in gay community (Knox et al., 1999). In other studies, illicit drug use was associated with attendance at commercial gay social venues, sex-on-premises venues, and attending ‘circuit parties’ (Lee et al., 2003; Mansergh et al., 2001; Thiede et al., 2003; Halkitis et al., 2001).

Sexual adventurism has been identified as a factor in sexual risk behaviour (Smith et al., 2004; Difrancia et al., 1996) and in HIV seroconversion (Kippax et al., 1998) and indicators of sexual adventurism have also been strongly associated with methamphetamine use (Clatts et al., 2005; Halkitis et al., 2001) or with illicit drug use in general (Smith et al., 2004; Prestage et al., 2007). Understandably, most research conducted to date has considered possible causal influences of drug use upon sexual risk. Sexual risk, and other factors, may, however, also influence drug use: research has documented the impact of social networks, environments and neighbourhoods upon both the types and likelihood of drug use (Petronis and Anthony, 2003; Storr et al., 2004). Green and Halkitis (2006) argue that methamphetamine in particular is used by gay men in more sexually adventurous subcultures specifically to enhance and enable their sexual experiences, some of which may include risk behaviours. Men who use illicit drugs more frequently may be more likely to participate in sexually adventurous subcultures and so may be at significantly greater risk than those who use these drugs either occasionally or not at all. It may also be that men are at increased risk as they move into these sexually adventurous subcultures.

To date, no study has examined the predictors of increased illicit drug use among a cohort of HIV-negative gay men. Sexual behaviour may play a role here and be predictive of an escalation of illicit drug use among this population. Illicit drug use and sexual behaviours, especially risky sexual behaviours, may be associated with one another and in complex ways.

In a cohort of HIV-negative gay men in Sydney, Australia, in the context of casual sex, neither episode-specific nor *any* illicit drug use in the previous six months was independently associated with UAIC (Prestage et al., 2005); however, illicit drug use when used to enhance sexual pleasure *was* independently associated with any UAIC (Mao et al., 2006). Findings were similar in a study of HIV-positive gay men in Sydney (Prestage et al., 2007). These findings and those of Green and Halkitis (2006) suggest that the reasons for using illicit drugs may be related to sexual performance and pleasure.

The relationships between illicit drug use, sexual risk and sexual adventurism are important issues to consider in Australia given increased HIV notifications among homosexual men in

recent years, where sexual exposure remains the main risk factor (National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research, 2005). There have also been significant changes in the availability and use of a range of drugs over this period, specifically more potent forms of methamphetamine, gamma hydroxybutyrate (GHB) and ketamine. These changes have been reflected in sentinel samples of gay men sampled from the Sydney area (Degenhardt et al., 2005).

In this paper, we investigate the relationships between frequent (i.e. at least weekly) drug use and risk behaviour in a sample of HIV-negative gay men in Sydney. Specifically, we investigate the extent to which sexual risk practices predicted a transition to more frequent use of amphetamine type stimulants. We examined: (1) the association between use of these drugs and UAIC in the 6 months prior to interview at baseline; (2) whether sexual risk practices predicted the transition from less than weekly to more frequent use; and (3) whether the pattern of associations differed for ‘ecstasy’ compared with methamphetamine, given that there may be different predictive relationships between specific types of drug use and HIV risk (Drumright et al., 2006).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were from the ongoing Health in Men (HIM) cohort of HIV-negative homosexual and bisexual men, which commenced recruitment in July 2001. To be eligible, men had to live in Sydney or, for those very few who did not actually live in Sydney, to regularly participate in Sydney’s gay community, as defined by themselves, and be aged 18 or older. HIV-negative serostatus was confirmed by a serological test at intake.

2.2. Questionnaire

Participants were interviewed face-to-face on a broad range of topics including: sexuality and sexual identity, involvement in gay community, contact with the HIV epidemic, sexual relationships and sexual practices with regular and casual partners, and drug and alcohol use (Mao et al., 2002).

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Outcome variables. Men were asked several questions about illicit drug use: which drugs and how often they had used them in the previous 6 months, categorised as: never; once or twice; about once a month, about once a week; more than once a week; every day. We examined incident weekly (or more) use of ‘ecstasy’, and of ‘speed’ and ‘crystal meth’. ‘Ecstasy’ is the street term for tablets purported to contain MDMA (or 3,4-methylenedioxyamphetamine) and methamphetamine; in this paper, we present the results for MDMA based upon participants’ use of tablets mainly sold as ‘ecstasy’. Tablets sold as ecstasy may contain a range of other substances that do not include MDMA (Dunn et al., 2006). Methamphetamine is the dominant form of amphetamines in Australia (Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence 2002) and the powder traditionally known as ‘speed’ is generally methamphetamine rather than amphetamine. Results presented here concerning methamphetamine include both speed and other, more potent, forms of methamphetamine (known by terms such as ice, shabu, crystal meth, base and paste) which have become more commonly used in recent years in Australia among injecting drug users and among those affiliated with dance party subcultures (Topp et al., 2002; Dunn et al., 2006).

2.3.2. Measures of gay community attachment. The men were asked an extensive range of detailed questions about their involvement in gay community

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