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Use of alcohol and drugs in the view of people living with HIV/AIDS: a qualitative study



M.A.A. Oliveira Serra ^{a,*}, R. Araújo e Silva ^a, E.P. Beserra ^b, T.N. Melo ^a,
L.V. Sousa ^a, M.F.M. Araújo ^c

^a Federal University of Maranhão, Imperatriz, Brazil

^b Federal University of Ceará, Fortaleza, Brazil

^c University for International Integration Lusophony Afro Brazilian, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To investigate the meaning of the experiences of patients infected by HIV using antiretroviral therapy, regarding the use of alcohol and drugs.

Study design: A qualitative phenomenological study.

Method: A total of 25 patients receiving antiretroviral treatment participated in the investigation, of which 14 were male and 11 were females, who expressed their feelings and perceptions through participation in focus groups and the interpretation of costumes. The empirical material was transcribed in full and later organized and analyzed using the phenomenological method.

Results: Based on this amusing experience we realized that participants were unaware of the effects of the use of alcohol and drugs in the AIDS progression. Since they have kept with their smoking and alcoholism habits to be accepted in a social group and consequently prevent prejudice. We believe that our health education strategy was adequate to improve antiretroviral therapy, since it helped in subject comprehension and patients self-care body expression.

Conclusion: This phenomenological study made it possible to understand the experience of patients living with HIV regarding the use of alcohol and drugs, and contributes to the planning and implementation of intervention programs based on a participative model of care, with a view to prioritizing the holistic aspects involved in the treatment of people living with HIV/AIDS.

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Introduction

The advent of antiretroviral treatment (ART) has contributed to the increasing quality of life of people living with HIV/AIDS, as the drugs control the replication of the HIV virus and

increase the patients' immunity.¹ However, adherence to the treatment in the long-term is a major challenge for the health professionals who care for this clientele, requiring constant guidance regarding the importance of adherence to the treatment, and changes in lifestyle.²

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: cidinhaenfauc@yahoo.com.br (M.A.A. Oliveira Serra).

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The regular use of ART has demonstrated an important reduction in morbidity and mortality resulting from AIDS;³ nevertheless, many patients who make use of alcohol and other illicit drugs do not manage to adhere to the treatment necessary for maintaining viral suppression and avoiding the development of resistant strains.⁴

The use of alcohol, among people living with HIV/AIDS, increases the risk of unsafe sexual behaviors and the chances of transmitting the virus,⁵ as well as contributing to the more rapid progression of the disease and the appearance of complications related to AIDS.⁶

Patients infected with HIV have higher chances of becoming involved in the use of alcohol and drugs than those who are not infected.^{7–10} Besides this, patients who are undergoing antiretroviral therapy concomitantly with the use of alcohol have a higher probability of developing other comorbidities.^{11–13}

Studies have shown that the use of alcohol leads to harm in the health of people living with HIV/AIDS, reducing their immunity through harming immune cells such as lymphocytes and macrophages, which are also targets of the HIV virus,¹⁴ and causes lesions in organs such as the liver¹⁵ and lungs,¹⁶ as well as neurological¹⁷ and cardiovascular dysfunctions.¹⁸

The significant morbidity resulting from the use of alcohol and drugs by patients infected with the HIV virus, and the various complications resulting from AIDS, have led health professionals to seek strategies for improving these patients' quality of life.¹⁹ Group attendance favors a joint experience, in which the experiences expressed by people living with HIV/AIDS empower the patient to cope better with the disease, adhere better to the treatment, and use healthy living behaviors.²⁰

Therefore, exploring the experiences of patients infected with the HIV virus regarding the use of alcohol and drugs during antiretroviral treatment will allow the elaboration of concrete and contextualized actions for this clientele, with strong implications in the undertaking of preventive measures and appropriate health actions in the control of this infection.

In the light of this, the present study aims to understand the meaning of the experiences of people living with HIV/AIDS using antiretroviral medications regarding the use of alcohol and drugs.

Method

Study design

This is an exploratory study with a qualitative character. The phenomenological method was adopted with the aim of describing, in depth, the experiences lived through and perceived by the people living with HIV/AIDS regarding the use of alcohol and drugs, so as to construct a meaning through the intensive dialog.²¹

The undertaking of the study complied with Brazilian and international norms for ethics in research involving human beings. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee, under Opinion number: 1,548,707. All the participants signed the terms of free and informed consent prior to joining the study.

Study location

The investigation was undertaken between October 2015 and February 2016 in a Municipal Referral Service attending to people living with HIV/AIDS in the Northeast of Brazil. The service is currently monitoring 1022 patients with HIV/AIDS and has a multidisciplinary team.

Participants

The subjects were recruited by convenience, while they were waiting for appointments with doctors or nurses, following invitations to participate in the focus groups and clarification relating to how these function. The following inclusion criteria were established: patients aged 18 years old or over, who had the HIV virus, and who were registered in the Municipal STD/HIV/AIDS Program and using antiretrovirals. The following were considered as exclusion criteria: patients with cognitive deficits, communication deficits, or who were seriously ill, who were unable to participate in the focus groups.

The participants consented to participate in the focus group. The first group began with a brief presentation from the team which would lead the actions; later, the participants were also invited to present themselves, so that familiarization could be created between the participants and researchers. Later, for detection of the study participants' knowledge and prior experiences in relation to the issue, a guiding question was elaborated 'Does the use of alcoholic drinks, and drugs, go with the HIV virus?' In addition, in order to obtain in-depth data, complementary questions were developed 'What do you know about the effect of alcohol and drugs on people's health?' and 'Does anybody have any experiences to report on this topic?'

Data collection took place through the patients' reports during the focus group, which were audio-recorded. Furthermore, a questionnaire was used for recording sociodemographic data, the use of antiretrovirals, and the patients' clinical condition, which were obtained through consulting the medical records.

During the undertaking of the focus groups, the participants of the same sex remained together, due to the fact that the experiences particular to each gender were considered important mechanisms for reflection on the topic. The identification of the participants deriving from the focus groups was codified using the letters 'MP' for 'male participant', and 'FP' for 'female participant', in order to ensure the confidentiality of the information provided.

Data analysis

The reports were transcribed in full and later organized and analyzed using the phenomenological method, as proposed by Colaizzi,²² which includes the following steps: (1) reading all the reports in order to visualize the whole; (2) reviewing each report and extracting the significant statements; (3) stating the meaning of each significant statement and elaborating meanings; (4) organizing the meanings formulated by grouping them into themes; (5) integrating the results in an exhaustive description of the phenomenon in question; (6)

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