Viral Load Strategy:
Essentials, Popularity and Impact on Sexual Risk Behavior and
Serocommunication of MSM in Specialized Outpatient Care

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Background and Objectives

- Incidence and prevalence of HIV continue to be high among German men, who have sex with men (MSM).
- Different transmission risk minimizing strategies have been observed.
- The viral load strategy (VLS) rates patients unlikely to be sexually infectious if their viral load under effective therapy is stably suppressed during six months and no other sexually transmitted infections (STI) are present (“Swiss statement”).
- Until now, no data on a German sample of HIV+ MSM in specialized outpatient care are available.
- Supported by the German Competence Network for HIV/AIDS, we aim to objectify the current popularity of VLS, the context of its practice, the adherence to its basic requirements and its impact on risk behavior and serocommunication.

Methodology

- 269 structured interviews and self-report questionnaires were conducted with German HIV+ MSM in specialized outpatient care.
- Group comparison between the user and the non-user group of VLS was carried out by using standardized tests ($\chi^2$ test, Fisher’s exact test, Mann-Whitney U-test; significance level: $\alpha = 0.05$).

Results

Table 1. Overview of results on sexual risk behavior and serocommunication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>VLS group</th>
<th>Reference group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unprotected insertive anal sex</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>59.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unprotected receptive anal sex</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent condom use</td>
<td>68.3%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymousex partners</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
<td>70.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent communication about HIV/AIDS in general</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent serostatus disclosure</td>
<td>68.3%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No disclosing in anonymous settings</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
<td>70.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seroguessing</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

- Among the sexually active respondents, 10% stated using the VLS.
- A larger proportion of this subgroup reported to generally have had unprotected insertive (59.3% vs. 36.0%) and receptive (55.6% vs. 35.5%) anal intercourse.
- 37% specified unprotected sex with 11 to >100 sex partners in 12 months (vs. 13.2%).
- Consistent safer sex was less common (22.2% vs. 68.3%), monogamous relationships were reported by 11.1%, also more anonymous sex partners were stated (70.4% vs. 43.6%).
- Furthermore, a bigger proportion on high dimensions of sexual sensation seeking (40.7% vs. 18.1%) and a more frequent intake of potency supplements ($p=.000$) was found.

- Analyzing serocommunication, less addressing HIV/AIDS in general ($p=.043$) and less frequent disclosing to sex partners ($p=.023$) were found, especially in anonymous settings: omitted serocommunication effected to 63% personally unknown sex partners.
- Differentiating serocommunication characteristics, a focus on seroguessing was depicted.

Conclusions

- The user group of VLS is small, but it diverges greatly from the targeted group of VLS, which requires an informed and monogamous relationship.
- A less frequent, more reactive and assumptive serocommunication leads to an imprecise information exchange, paired with a higher frequency of risky behavior, especially in anonymous settings.
- Without an open serocommunication in these settings, other – potentially asymptomatic – STI may be passed on.
- Thus, a subversion of a basic condition of the VLS seems possible and the HIV transmission risk may be higher than assumed.

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