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BACKGROUND

HIV self-testing (HIVST) is not available in Argentina yet. A greater understanding of the experiences of potential users among key populations in Latin America and the Caribbean is needed to inform decisions on future implementation. In February-August 2021, a pilot study was conducted to evaluate the feasibility and acceptability of HIVST among transgender women (TGW) and gay, bisexual and other cisgender men having sex with men (GBMSM) attending an HIV testing service at an NGO in Buenos Aires metropolitan area. Initially, 149 GBMSM were provided with three HIVST kits to be performed on a monthly basis after an initial demonstration and training and a first negative HIVST. Median age was 26 (IQR: 23-31), 91.8% had secondary education or higher. Median number of sexual partners during the last six months was 5 (IQR: 3-7); 21.9% mentioned having used drugs in the last six months and 18.4% were engaged in some form of sex work in the last six months. Upon completion, a qualitative study was carried out to explore the experiences of participants with HIVST.

METHOD

Eight GBMSM were randomly invited to a focus group conducted over Zoom and only four participated (Ages: 31, 30, 27 and 24). An additional one on one interview was held with a participant that tested positive throughout the study. Qualitative data was analyzed in coding sessions, using an inductive thematic content analysis approach. Emerging themes were identified and discussed and then combined into a codebook agreed upon by team members.

RESULTS

Convenience and time efficiency are HIVST major advantages

HIVST was **acceptable** among GBMSM, being cited as a more **convenient and easy-to-use** tool than having a regular test performed at a healthcare facility. GBMSM believed that HIVST is a practical solution that **addresses the inconvenience of traveling** to distant locations and provides a **time-saving** advantage.

“I believe that self-testing is to a great extent a time-saver. For example, being from the suburbs, sometimes having to go to Buenos Aires City for a test or having to do it at a healthcare facility that I know is far away, makes it difficult for me. I think the good thing about it is the convenience in terms of time and speed (Q., 24 years old)”.

Providing user-friendly instructions and visual aids

Difficulties in obtaining blood samples **decreased with practice** and participants were **confident** that they were able to **use the device and interpret** its results correctly. The written instructions, complemented by the explanation in **supporting videos**, appeared to be sufficient for most users. The inclusion of visual aids can be particularly **beneficial for** individuals who may have difficulty understanding written instructions or **those with varying literacy levels**.

“The instructions are very well developed, because the images with each step by step are well explained, that gives a lot of accessibility. I think that anyone will be able to follow these instructions (B.27 years old).”

The importance of HIVST for early detection

The participant who received a positive result suggested that HIVST kits are particularly useful in cases such as early infections, when people test negative due to window periods. He expressed that he might have waited much longer to retest for HIV, delaying treatment initiation, if he had not have an HIVST available.

“(I tested positive) Just with the self-testing kit, 30 days after the first test (in the NGO), I took the next one at home and I was in the window period, obviously. So I recommend it just for those cases, because sometimes people go to take a test and they are negative and then they go home very calm and maybe they stay at home for six months; or maybe there are people that wait for a year and you could have been in the window period and you could have acted faster. That is exactly what happened in my case (M, 26 years old)”.

Using messaging for seeking expert guidance

The need to have referral **help-lines** using messaging for **users who happen to test positive** was highlighted. The participant mentioned that he felt it was important to hear the opinion of someone who is knowledgeable about the topic, especially when one is unsure about what **steps to take or how to proceed regarding medical care**.

“I had a number to call the NGO so I wrote by a Whatsapp message to that number, which seemed to me as it should be (implemented), because I mean it is a moment when you really need to hear the opinion of someone who knows about the subject, or you do not know what to do at that time and the truth was the best because they could tell me what steps to take as I was going to continue everything. (M, 26 years old)”.

The implications of unrestricted sales on discrimination

One participant expressed concerns about unrestricted sales of HIVST. He mentioned the possibility of companies requiring testing as a condition for employment and the potential for discrimination based on test results.

“We have to be careful about the ways the sale would be so freely (unrestricted), in the sense that a company (could) want to force a person to take a test. I mean, for a job, for me that would be a problem and a difficulty because it would not be so good because, I don't know, there could be an issue of discrimination in relation to the result. (B.27 years old)”.

CONCLUSIONS

HIVST is a combination prevention strategy that could greatly benefit populations, particularly GBMSM, facing stigma and discrimination living in remote locations with limited HIV services, or where confidentiality may be threatened. Convenience and time efficiency were identified as major advantages, offering a more accessible and user-friendly alternative to traditional testing at a healthcare facility. In implementing HIVST, it is crucial to prioritize prompt pre and post-test counseling by experts and ensure early access to HIV care and treatment for those who test positive. Furthermore, it is important to carefully consider the potential implications and safeguards when it comes to unrestricted sales and the possibility of discrimination in employment settings.