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Missed opportunities for STI testing: a mixed methods study of the impact of a stand-alone HIV testing service.

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Introduction:

Australian guidelines recommend all gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (GBM) test annually for HIV and other STIs, with GBM classified as high risk men recommended to test up to four times annually. A community-based, peer-led HIV point-of care testing (POCT) service, PRONTO!, opened in Melbourne in 2013 offering free testing. While syphilis POCT was introduced in June 2014, service model constraints have restricted gonorrhoea and chlamydia testing to a pilot period between November-December 2014. We explore the potential impact of not integrating of STI testing at PRONTO!.

Methods:

We surveyed clients attending PRONTO! between May-October 2014, in addition to conducting focus groups with survey participants. We describe HIV/STI testing history and service preferences from survey data alongside thematic analysis of focus group discussions.

Results:

The characteristics of 297 survey respondents and 16 focus groups participants were generally consistent with men testing at PRONTO!. 250 survey respondents (84%) had tested for HIV prior to first testing at PRONTO!; 90% reported usually testing for STIs when receiving a HIV test. Approximately half (52%) of all respondents said they planned to seek STI testing elsewhere and 20% cited that not offering comprehensive STI screening at PRONTO! as a reason not to return to PRONTO! for HIV testing. Focus group participants emphasised the importance of convenience when deciding the timing, location and range of STI tests sought. In the presence of STI symptoms, participants expressed preference for involving medical professionals in HIV/STI screening.

Conclusion:

An exclusive HIV POC testing service introduces barriers to comprehensive sexual health screening for MSM in Melbourne, reducing service convenience and potentially the frequency with which clients test for STIs. The service design may also dissuade other men from accessing HIV testing at a service found to be highly acceptable among clients.