

Well Well Well: Overseas Born MSM



SPEAKERS

Jessie, Intro, Michael, Jason, Esh

- I** **Intro** 00:00
- Welcome to a joy cast from JOY 94.9. Visit joy.org.au To find out more about our JOYcasts.. This is Well Well Well. Sex, health, and well-being in our LGBTI communities presented by JOYsponsor Thorne Harbour Health.
- J** **Jessie** 00:30
- You're listening to Well, Well, Well on JOY 94.9 brought to you each and every week by Thorne Harbour Health. If you haven't heard of us before, Well Well Well I is a show where we discuss all things about sexual health, mental health, and overall well being for our sexuality and gender diverse communities. Welcome, thank you for tuning in. My name is Jessie, your host for the evening and I am joined by Michael as a co-host
- M** **Michael** 00:57
- Hello, and pressing the buttons as well. One of my favourite things to do. How are you

going, Jessie?



Jessie 01:02

I'm good. It's really great to have you on with me Michael because it's been a while I feel like I've been doing these shows alone for a while. It's always good to have a partner in crime.



Michael 01:10

Indeed.



Jessie 01:11

Yes. So today, our discussion is really going to be focusing on overseas born men who have sex with men, including trans men and really provide our listeners with a clear roadmap on how to access PrEP, as well as general HIV and STI services.



Michael 01:30

Indeed, indeed. And we've got some fabulous guests joining us today we will be chatting with Jason Ong from Melbourne Sexual Health Centre, and then a little bit later on Eshwar our good, good mate Esh down at pronto downstairs here at 200 Hoddle street in Abbotsford at our new location. But then also we are kind of acting as as our own kind of in house specialists from kind of different lenses. So my lens being kind of PrEP access, particularly for people that can't afford it. And for yourself, Jessie working within the multicultural space. Just on that. Did you want to tell us a little bit about what you do in the different communities you reach through your project?



Jessie 02:07

Yeah, absolutely. So in particular, so I'm the lead for the Multicultural Program at Thorne Harbour. And this really supports all LGBTIQ community from a multicultural background, which is a really broad definition. But essentially, it's you know, for migrants or people who are born overseas, international students. Largely those who don't have Medicare pretty much is a good way to really categorise that. And yeah, so we work in, you know, in general in improving their sexual health and well being and what this looks like, is through, education, whether it's campaigns improving access, really trying to assist with behaviour change in terms of their healthcare seeking behaviour. But personally, the way I see it as one of the most important factors in that whole process is really community engagement.

M

Michael 03:03

Yep. And so I guess, why have we chosen this this topic today? Why are we talking specifically about the lens of an overseas born man who has sex with men in relation to HIV? What's kind of prompted that discussion today?

J

Jessie 03:18

Yeah, so the reason for that is because, you know, Jason will go into this more a little bit with regards to the stats and what-not. But the HIV notifications amongst overseas born men who have sex with men, including trans men really is rising. You know, for several different reasons. But also, I just want to pay attention to this population, you know, accessing stuff like this. And, you know, just in general, navigating the Australian healthcare system is bloody daunting sometimes.

M

Michael 03:50

Unless you're already in the system it's very hard to kind of jump on that kind of already moving train. And there's lots of different, aspects to that about particularly if you are a students and accessing your private health insurance and the kind of issues around that. We'll talk about that in a little bit. But it's also worth noting that, you know, HIV, notifications are increasing in those communities of overseas born men who have sex with men, but across the board, they're plateauing, which means that our Australian born men who have sex with men are seeing kind of a decrease in HIV. So we want to take all that really good, hard work that's being done in making things like PrEP accessible for those people and apply it elsewhere. So where we're seeing new HIV transmissions.

J

Jessie 04:30

Yeah, absolutely. And you know, at the end of the day, the access to services isn't great, you know, in terms of like numbers, who are accessing testing and all this kind of stuff of what we're seeing walks through the door. So yeah, really attempting to break down those barriers and inform these populations in these communities that, you know, what's out there, and we're here to help.

M

Michael 04:51

Yep. And thinking about some of those barriers, and I'll probably talk about how to kind of address at least some of those barriers, particularly when it comes to PrEP access. But what, for a multicultural personal for someone born overseas, what might some of those

barriers look like in terms of accessing appropriate sexual health screening?



Jessie 05:09

Yeah, so I'm really glad that I get to talk about this, because this is a really forefront sort of topic of my role. And that's something I've been working through. And it's quite a complex answer, right? I'll start with the fact that, you know, growing up overseas, where talking about sex is slightly taboo, and also the education system. So, there's a lack of education in a forefront. And other than that, there's so much stigma, because, you know, some of these countries, it might be still illegal to, you know, be a homosexual. And so there's so much stigma around that there's internalised stigma, there's externalised stigma, there's discrimination. And so it's very, very, like not spoken about. So coming over to a new country, there's so much at them, and maybe, you know, they suddenly feel like "Oh, amazing, I can kind of do all these things, and I can have my freedom and stuff." But you know, they don't have the community to support them. They're engaging in risky sexual practices that they don't really have the education or just the knowledge around how to keep themselves safe, you know, so so that's one of the things as well. As well as navigating the Australian healthcare system is, is really difficult and confusing, at the best of times, like we said, but when we're talking about overseas health cover that you need to have, you know, because there's so much stigma, some of them don't want to use their overseas health insurance to access these sexual health services, because there's a fear that it is going to show up on their record, back home. And I just also, you know, want to make it clear that it's important to double check, because that's not always the case. You know, it doesn't necessarily, in fact, I have spoken to a few and I can't be specific at the moment, but it's rare that they specify, you know, you're getting a sexual health test.



Michael 07:00

And that's in the context of, particularly if you're at, say, an international student, and you've got all your ducks in a row got new your private health insurance at home in your country of origin, then you've arrived here, and maybe Mum and Dad at home or your caregivers at home are your policy-holders technically. Or they're footing the bill. So there, people might have concerns about letters or emails going home to say, your child has accessed X Y, Z, and that raising questions around Well, why are you asking accessing that service? We're sending you to go study, not to go and have sex overseas. But, you know, you can do both things!



Jessie 07:34

Absolutely. And we understand that this is a very real fear for people. And what we also

will go through in the rest of the show is really provide avenues that, you know, you don't have to worry about that. And there are services that are totally free. But yeah, it's just it's definitely a real fear that we need to be aware of and I think we are because you know, things are changing and what-not. There's also the language barrier. Right? So when it comes to outreach, or education programmes, you know, primarily, we're an English speaking country, and it might, you know, be a completely new language for people to learn. So there's that. And then there's also just being overwhelmed with so many things when you're thinking about - you know - trying to get a part-time job to support yourself when you're studying, to figure out what to cook, and how to figure out the transport system, and making sure you've got somewhere to live, and making new friends and studying, you know, trying to pass... Sometimes it's just like the last thing on your mind. Right? Taking care of your sexual health, especially when it's something that you have never done before. And another reason is really, lack of connection to community. I think that's a really big one. Because when we are connected to community, it is really supportive for better health care seeking behaviour. Because, you know, education, kind of like we get so much of our information from our friends, honestly, right? Rather than even like healthcare professionals, but when you have a community to fall back on giving you the right advice, it's a game changer! But, it's also really supportive for more positive mental health outcomes, connection to all kinds of like, programmes or LGBTI support or anything like that, which you would be lacking if you were just coming over here as an overseas student.

M

Michael 09:18

Yep. And potentially trying to find not one but multiple communities to connect with. Yay you've arrived solo, you're an international student, for example. You might be looking to find your, your culinary community that cooks the same food as you or you're trying to find other students that are studying the same subjects as you so you can skillshare or finding your queer community if that's a space you're trying to find or say you're a gamer, you're trying to find the gamers community and stuff. So you're trying to do quite a lot of work all at once, as well as potentially dealing with systemic racism and all those different barriers to just general good sexual health and mental health and general health and well being so quite a lot to kind of a lot wrangle with. But thankfully today, one of the things we're going to be talking about is if you are thinking about your sexual health screening, or you are thinking about getting on PrEP while you're here as, say, an international student, we're kind of going to lay some of those things out for you. Give you some options, so that you can take those things away, and think, "Great, I'm going to pop down to this clinic room and go there. And this is what this is what the road ahead looks like, for me if I'm going to protect myself against HIV while I'm in Australia." And now what... I'm going back to some of the work that you've been doing, what are kind of some of the

initiatives you've worked on? I know, you've got a big, big project or big campaign that's kind of going on at the moment that kind of ties all of those things together around community and culinary stuff, as I kind of mentioned before.



Jessie 10:41

Yeah, exactly. So you know, working in this space, like, we kind of have to think outside the box a little bit, because, like I said, you know. Talking about sex and stuff is so taboo, even though that's what essentially we're trying to do educate them about sex and, and what-not. But, understanding that it's not necessarily what defines a person, and not necessarily how someone would identify themselves. You know, especially if it never has been, they don't necessarily identify themselves, as "I'm someone who has sex with men" you know? So one of the most recent projects that I did was The Bent Spoon ... because everybody loves food, especially when you have quite a diverse background food is such a big part of culture. It's such a big part of sharing and creating friendships and what-not. And so, as part of a community engagement strategy that was really, essentially just wanting to connect the LGBTIQ community from multicultural backgrounds, develop this now that's turned into an online series called The Bent Spoon where we invited members of just from multicultural backgrounds to share a traditional dish from their culture, they come in and share some of their culture. And that's their story with the rest of the world through this little platform. And, you know, it's been amazing. It's actually had some really amazing feedback. And it's a form of engaging people as a whole human being. Yeah, which is important. And yeah, so that's one of the most recent projects I've done. And yeah, you know, there's, there's a few other really focuses on storytelling, personal experience, which is so important and seeing someone that they can relate to, who is from the same background or similar culture, I think, has been really, really powerful.



M

Michael 12:24

Yep. Because they're also sharing, you know, they're sharing these amazing dishes that are from their home country, but also sharing their stories about their experience as an LGBTQIA+ community member. They're talking about their experiences, you know, dating or with Uni, or with finding work or migrating and all those kinds of things and, and like you said, understanding someone's experience, holistically not just "You are a gay man. You are an Asian woman. You are this you are that." Yeah, it's a it's a holistic experience. Yeah. Yeah. That's wonderful. Well, we might take a quick break here on Well Well Well on JOY 94.9. Next up, we'll be chatting with Jason Ong from Melbourne Sexual Health Centre. A little bit later, we'll be chatting with Esh from PROTNO! And then we'll do a little bit of a powwow about PrEP later on in the show. That's all coming up here on JOY 94.9

J

Jessie 13:11

You're listening to Well Well Well here on JOY 94.9. And I would like to welcome Dr. Jason Ong, a sexual health physician at Melbourne Sexual Health Centre, who does have a keen interest in working with supporting overseas born MSM communities. Jason, welcome.

J

Jason 13:30

Thanks, Jessie. Great to be here.

J

Jessie 13:32

Yeah, it's so good to have you. So we're just going to jump straight into it. We've just been chatting about overseas born men who have sex with men communities, can you give us a sort of snapshot, high level view of what HIV notifications are looking like, at the moment for this population?

J

Jason 13:51

Yeah, so in general, HIV is say, we just focused on Victoria, it's plateaued over the last few years. But part of that is kind of a 'cancelling out'. So we see the Australian born, gay bisexual men rates going down, but the overseas born ones actually rising. So it kind of cancels out. So unfortunately, this is a group that's increasingly recognised as being at risk for HIV. So it's something that we need to pay more attention to.



Jessie 14:23

And do we have any specifics around figures you could give us?



Jason 14:28

Yeah, so the Department of Health in Victoria, we've got data up to the end of last year. So in general, the figures last year is a bit abnormal, and just because of COVID, so that the numbers completely had dropped. So the year before in 2019, was we have 277 new cases, but last year, we had 195. And that could be because of less people testing. It also could be because of less people having casual sex, so it's a bit hard to tease that out.



Michael 15:00

Yep. Now when you say overseas born men who have sex with men, you know, those infections are kind of on the rise, whereas Australian born men who have sex with men, are decreasing somewhat, when you say overseas born men who have sex with men, what kind of communities are we talking about that might be affected?



Jason 15:18

Um, so the new infections are coming predominantly from those who recently arrived. So those within five years of arriving in Australia. And what we're seeing in Victoria in particular, are the new infections are coming predominantly from the Asian countries, predominantly South East Asia, and then maybe about a third from from Africa and some from South America. So that's those are the kind of main communities that we're seeing in terms of the new HIV infections.



Michael 15:51

Yeah. And it's, this is going to be kind of a difficult thing to tease out. But in terms of, I mean, I don't know if I could ask you this in terms of how reliable is the data in terms of how we collect it? Because are we testing these communities more? And so it seems like you know, that the rates are going higher, but actually, it's just we're testing more, or, you know, is it actually being affected? Do we actually collect that data when we are reporting HIV notifications?



Jason 16:22

Yeah, we do, actually. So that's a great question. So is it because we are testing people

more, therefore we're detecting more? But in fact, the testing volumes hasn't really increased that much. So it's actually the increase in the positivity rates that we're noticing. So out of 100 people, the numbers of people who are HIV positive, are slowly kind of rising.

M

Michael 16:45

Now, Jason, we had a new one a couple of weeks ago, talking about STI testing, obviously, we're talking about HIV more specifically today. Can you tell us a little bit about the kinds of people that access Melbourne Sexual Health Centre's services?

J

Jason 16:57

Yeah, so we are the largest public sexual health clinic in Australia, actually. And so people, all sorts of people come to us. So we welcome about 60,000 different people a year. So it's a free and highly confidential service. So we, we tend to attract anyone, actually. So Medicare or non-Medicare holders, just because we are funded by the government to offer this free STI service. So we see people who are worried about sexually transmitted infections, people with sexual health issues. And also we look after people living with HIV. And because it's a completely free service. It doesn't matter if you've got Medicare or not. So we do actually attract a lot of people without Medicare as well to come to our service.

M

Michael 17:44

Yeah, great. So I guess that's what I wanted to ask was, are you actually seeing a lot of, you know, overseas, born MSM attending your service?

J

Jason 17:55

Yes. Yeah, that they're definitely coming. But as I like, last year is not and most of this year, it's actually not, we have definitely seen a decrease just because most of these people are kind of trapped overseas, like they can't come back to Australia. But if we say pre-COVID times, definitely, we do see a large proportion of overseas born and have sex with men.

M

Michael 18:20

And what about those communities that want access to something like PrEP? How do you kind of navigate access to PrEP, or Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis, for preventing HIV if someone doesn't have access to Medicare?

J Jason 18:32

Yeah, so this is an issue for us at the moment at Melbourne Sexual Health Centre because our current service don't offer PrEP for people without Medicare. Instead, there is another service that's affiliated with us at the Alfred Hospital called the PrEP Me Clinic. So this service is still within our organisation but on a different site. So it's not in Carlton at Melbourne Sexual Health Centre, but it's in the Alfred Hospital. And this premier clinic has been specifically designed to offer prep for the overseas born people without Medicare.



M Michael 19:06

Okay, and we'll go into that shortly. But I just want to be really clear. So Melbourne Sexual health Centre, what services are available specifically for overseas born men who have sex with men or anyone who, let's say, doesn't have Medicare? Are you saying that they are all free and which ones in particular just so we can be clear?

J Jason 19:26

Yeah, for sure. So, um, so people are coming in for an STI testing. So not for PrEP, just for sexually transmitted infections; chlamydia, gonorrhoea, syphilis, HIV, those kind of things. Or if you're living with HIV and you want some services, to look after your health. All of these services are free. So the free consultations, free testing and free treatment so if you need antibiotics, or if you need access to medications for HIV... all of these are provided for free and we also have counselling services as well, and again, everything is free there.

J Jessie 20:02

Yeah. Amazing. And also anonymous, right? If you choose to be.



Jason 20:07

Yep, exactly right. So you don't have to give us your real name if you're really worried. So you can just give us a pseudonym. So we, yeah, we treat you the same as everyone else.



Michael 20:17

Yep. You just need a name to be called out of the triage so that you know that it's your turn, basically.



Jason 20:23

Yeah, exactly what Yes.



Michael 20:24

Wonderful. And so thinking about the PrEP Me clinic. Can you tell us a little bit about how that got started? Obviously, it might be a bit strange for some people to think of, you know, Australia's largest sexual health service, not offering PrEP as kind of a standard thing. But that's obviously because you're very busy triaging other STIs and that sort of thing. So how did the PrEP Me clinic kind of come about? And what does it do?



Jason 20:48

Yeah, so I also want to clarify that we offer PrEP for people with Medicare. So people can still get access from from our clinic, it's just that those who have no Medicare, they have to go to different sites. So this this was Professor Edwina Wright's and others at at the Alfred Hospital, they saw this gap, I guess, in services. And they actually brought together various people to work out how do we access, or how do we give access to PrEP for those without Medicare. So it's kind of funded by their group. So it's not funded fully by the Commonwealth, as we do with Medicare. But we're trying to change that. So this service is one that it's particularly targeted at those without Medicare. So in other words, when someone turns up at PrEP Me, and they don't have Medicare card, they will not be charged a consultation fee to see the doctor. And also the testing that we normally do, which can cost up to \$200. For people without Medicare, these tests will be done for free for them. And it kind of accumulates quite quickly. Because for someone on PrEP, you need to come back every three months. So if you can imagine if if you don't have Medicare card, and you're seeing your doctor these \$200 per every three month (and then

on top of that consultation costs as well) can add up very quickly.

M

Michael 22:19

Yep. And in terms of getting obviously the the end result of that is your person that comes into PrEP Me, gets their prescription. How do they then go about accessing PrEP itself? We'll probably talk about this a little bit later, myself and Jessie around PrEP access for people that don't have Medicare. But how does that work at PrEP Me?

J

Jason 22:38

Yeah, so if you don't have Medicare, you can actually access your PrEP online. So that's a great website, as many of you listeners may know about already called pan.org.au. And they've got some links there about some online pharmacies that has been, I guess, trusted by the community. So you can buy PrEP for as low as \$19 per month to access that drug.



PAN
PrEP access NOW

M

Michael 23:04

Yeah. Great. So you said that this is free for overseas born MSM. What about the I suppose wider LGBTQ community? Is it the same for them? Or do they not get to access the free service at the clinic?

J

Jason 23:18

Yeah, so the premier clinic is open to everyone who has high risk exposure to HIV, or are part of a high risk group. So it doesn't have to be men have sex men, so heterosexuals can also come to the PrEP Me clinic as well?



Michael 23:34

Yeah, great. And so how does someone go about like booking an appointment or getting more information with regards to that?



Jason 23:42

Yep. So they can actually call the Alfred Hospital directly at the HIV Prevention Line. So the number is one 1800 889 887. So you don't have to be a doctor or whatever you can actually call us as a public layperson on that number, and they will do book you into the PrEP Me Clinic. Okay, great.



Jessie 24:05

Yeah, I'll make sure I put that number on the podcast as well. Have you got any last thoughts with regards to PrEP Me, or, you know, the service at Melbourne sexual health centre, for any of our listeners out there that might be perhaps apprehensive to getting tested or accessing PrEP?



Jason 24:25

Yeah, so looking after your sexual health is really important. So it's also very important to try to detect these sexually transmitted infections early. So if you have any symptoms at all, definitely come into Melbourne Sexual Health Centre to get checked or speak to your GP (doctor) if you're able to do that comfortably, not just to protect your health, but also protecting the health of the community as well. And the other thing I would say is that it's really important to get regular sexually transmitted infections (STI) checks. So at least once a year, even if you don't have any symptoms, and again, that's to protect your own health and the community.



Michael 25:01

Wonderful, thank you so much, Jason for joining us on the programme. Once again, we did have you a couple of weeks ago to talk about STIs. So if you would like to hear more from Jason head to [JOY.org.au/wellwellwell](https://joy.org.au/wellwellwell) to access any of our past podcasts, as well, as this podcast in the near future. And just to recap, you can check out Melbourne Sexual Health Centre's website which is mshc.org.au, which is located at 580 Swanston Street in Carlton. And to find out more about the services at the PrEP Me clinic located at the Alfred Hospital. You can check out some details on the PAN website, which is pan.org.au/no-Medicare or you can just go to the PAN website and check out the tab

where it is telling you how to access prep without Medicare or you can also just give their hotline that call on 1-800-889-887. Jason, thank you so much for being with us today.

J Jason 26:02
Thank you. Thanks Jessie.



M Michael 26:03
You are listening to Well Well Well here on JOY 94.9 with Michael and Jessie and we are now joined by Eswar the Lead Peer Test Facilitator at PRONTO! Thorne Harbour's HIV rapid testing Sservice. Welcome back to Well Well Well Esh, it's been a few weeks, but you're back.

E Esh 26:19
It's been a few weeks. Thanks, Jessie.

M Michael 26:22
Always great to have you on. Esh, tell us a little bit about the work that you do at Thorne Harbour in your role as the Lead Peer Test Facilitator, what exactly a peer facilitator does, why we use this model and who you're trying to reach.

E Esh 26:35
Alright, so I think I'll start off by describing what PRONTO is and what model it was used

to be to be set up. So PRONTO is actually based on a peer led testing facility called Magnet in San Francisco. Now, traditionally, because the community has faced a lot of stigma and discrimination and barriers in clinical settings, which can be quite rigid and cold and not very welcoming. This model was created to remove all those barriers. So in a sense, that PRONTO is a soft landing pad, where members of the community come into the service and we do a rapid HIV test, we speak about health promotion, we talk about risks, we talk about HIV prevention. And, in the discussion, if we find out that the client is going to need further clinical intervention, then we will do the referral to see a GP (doctor), particularly if it involves PrEP, or if they need PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis). So in a way the role is a bit... It's an amalgamation of a counsellor, a clinician, a member of the community.



M

Michael 27:59

So you're kind of straddling, you're both a clinical worker, but you're also a community touch point for people that want to come in and talk about their sexual health.

E

Esh 28:05

Absolutely, absolutely. And we use, you know, we try to use language that the community uses, we don't use complicated academic language or clinical language. So you know, and oftentimes, that in itself, can be a barrier. So what it does is that it removes the power in the room creates a sense that, okay, so the client is also us, and we are also part of the world of that community. So it removes that sort of the initial barrier, and it makes conversation a lot easier.

- M** Michael 28:40
I really like how you worded it saying it's a soft landing pad. And yeah, just to point out the real benefit of that, where you are talking to someone, you know, talking to someone about your sex life and stuff is already a little bit... can be daunting, especially from, you know, if you are not used to that kind of conversations, but to see someone who is from the community that really is your peer must bring a real level of comfort, and obviously, it works better than when, you know, as we've seen, then having a really clinical sort of approach.
- E** Esh 29:19
Definitely Jessie. And also, you know, traditionally because of how appointments are set up with GPs (doctors), it's usually a 10-minute appointment. The client comes in and gets the clinical side of things sorted and organised. But oftentimes the emotional side the mental health side, that doesn't get talked about...
- J** Jessie 29:42
...the relationship side, the trust side...
- E** Esh 29:43
Absolutely. So with our half an hour appointment at PRONTO while we do the rapid test, we also get to unpack a lot of things with the person.
- M** Michael 29:54
Just leading into that. Can you tell us a little bit about what what a rapid test actually is if I'm coming into to access PRONTO, what does the bracket test actually do? And what's the experience like?
- E** Esh 30:03
So the rapid test that we currently are now using is the Alere combo HIV antigen antibody test. It's a 20 minute test. we do a fingerprick. And then we set the timer for 20 minutes, and you will get your result after that. You know, it's pretty quick and easy. So in that 20 minutes, we do a risk assessment informally, and that helps to open up other conversations. And then in that time period as well we also do STI screening for those that are Medicare eligible. We do HIV serology, syphilis, chlamydia and gonorrhoea test. And,

and then once we give the result, if we have identified any other risk or factors that you know, that the person wants to explore, we talk about PEP referral, we'll talk about PrEP referral, or if the person is symptomatic, we book them in.

J Jessie 31:00

Yeah, so just to be really clear, because, you know, we really are talking about overseas born gay and bisexual men, including trans men. And you said that the rapid testing is free, if you don't have Medicare, but the STI screening isn't?

E Esh 31:17

The rapid HIV testing is free, that is covered in our funding. But at the moment, STI testing is not free. So what we sometimes do is that we explained to the client, they could get the testing pay it upfront, and then claim it back from the insurance provider. Or if that tricky if there is, you know, if they're concerned about confidentiality, privacy issues there, we refer that to go to Melbourne Sexual Health Centre, because they do it for free with or without Medicare.

J Jessie 31:50

Yeah, and we've talked about some of the other services that provide that, as well.

E Esh 31:54

We've got to bear in mind as well, because the service, ultimately PRONTO's role is to diagnose people. And the process of diagnosing members of the community in the past has been quite traumatic, where, - and this is just based on the data that we've collected over the years - and hearing stories from members of the community where people have often been told by clinicians that "I'm sorry that you're HIV positive" or "I'm sorry that you have to go through this" and that has long term damage that can cause long term trauma towards the recipient of the results recovery. At PRONTO, that's one of the most crucial thing that we do. And that is, we try to create, as I said, mentioned earlier, a padded landing for the client. There is something about the context of someone who is a member of the community, who understands HIV, delivering the message to a client, and then referring them on for treatment and care. Yes, it is a traumatic experience. But it is nowhere near how it has been done in the past. So therefore, we see the person going through a process of grief, and then quickly on to acceptance, and then getting on to treatment, and recovery.

M Michael 33:41
So essentially, what you're saying there is a lot of care that is put into that process,

E Esh 33:47
there is a lot of care that is put into that process. And that's the part where as peer testers at PRONTO, as I mentioned, it can be a little bit of a grey area. Because for us as peer test facilitators, every patient who books in with us could potentially get a reactive result. So we are always prepared for that.

M Michael 34:10
Absolutely, incredibly key roles in the community. And yeah, it's it's a really important and great role. And I just want to give some acknowledgement to that for all the peer test facilitators out there, which is really, really incredible and have a lot of respect for the role that you do.

E Esh 34:29
Thank you, Jessie.

M Michael 34:32
Putting this kind of lens on to what we're talking about today, which is overseas born men who have sex with men. How does the experience differ for those people? Or how do we need to be, as a health service, how do we need to be more welcoming and opening and accepting of those people. I know for us at work here at 200 Hoddle Street, where PRONTO is located, you know, our building doesn't have any signage that's very, you know, openly out loud and queer. It's not until you kind of come into the service that you realise that it's a queer-friendly service. Is that one of the kind of the indicators that it might be a more welcoming service? You know, it's relatively discreet if you look at the building.

E Esh 35:09
I think so, Michael, because I think sometimes, what we as people who are out and proud in the community, might deem as welcoming and inclusive with signages may not be the case for other aspects of our community. So I think that is definitely very important to keep a very neutral facade and our facade is very neutral. And, you know, we do know

that there are large members of our community due to various reasons due to stigma, discrimination, culture, faith, internalised homophobia may not enter a service that can be identified as a queer service from the outside.



Jessie 36:03

In fact, it's a deterrent.



Esh 36:05

In fact, it's a deterrent. So we have seen a slight change of our clients compared to where, from where we were at 175 Rose Street, to where we are now, at 200 Hoddle Street, but that's quite normal, because people will have to adapt to a new environment. And then they will eventually walk in again.



Michael 36:30

Exactly. And also, during the transition from going from 175 Rose Street to here at 200 Hoddle Street in Abbotsford, we've undergone a little thing called a global pandemic. So there's obviously there would be a lot of people that just haven't bothered with their STI testing, because they've been, you know, not sexually active during this kind of pandemic period. So it'll probably take a while for some of those wheels to start turning again for some folk.



Esh 36:52

Absolutely. We did notice that pattern is a new pattern that we are getting used to. Initially, after the first lockdown we had a trickle of people come in. And we did notice that a lot of people came in with anxiety. And traditionally, and historically, it's a community that's been isolated and marginalised, and perhaps lonely as well. So the pandemic definitely took a toll on this community. After the second and the third lockdown, we are slowly starting to see our old clients come back again, and get back into the routine.



Jessie 37:30

So I guess more anecdotally, like as a frontline worker, and I know it's quite hard because of our previously aforementioned little global pandemic as a general snapshot, like, what are we seeing in terms of the types of people walking into the service or accessing the service? Are we seeing many from overseas? Are they mostly Australian born is there sort

of a gauge you can get on that?

E

Esh 37:56

We've seen, we're seeing a different group of people come through now we used to see a lot of international students, overseas people who came here with work visas, backpackers, travellers. But that shifted, now we are seeing very low numbers of international students. But I'm hoping that will pick up because basically, that was where we did the main part of our work, because a lot of people who come from overseas, particularly countries that have very harsh anti-LGBTIQ laws, come here with no information on sexual health, risks, prevention, PEP, PrEP, and all that. So a bulk of our work was done in the room, disseminating this information. And over time, we see people getting comfortable and coming back again, and again and again. But we're not seeing that group anymore. So hopefully, with international travel, when it resumes, hopefully, that will change. But we are also seeing... we've always had a portion of bisexual men come through the service as well. And so it's a different group of people that we're seeing at the moment.

J

Jessie 39:25

Yeah, and I just want to mention that I can imagine that having someone who is from a particular community, a person of colour, someone from multicultural background, would also provide some confidence in that particular community. Am I right?

E

Esh 39:43

Absolutely. Especially with the migrant refugee asylum seeker, LGBTQ community. It's another way of lifting the barrier. So because there's someone that they could relate to and what it does is it removes all the the early bits of introduction, and it does almost the sense trust. So it makes it a lot easier. And at PRONTO, we do have a very, very diverse, culturally diverse workforces as well. And and since then we've seen a lot more people from these cultural backgrounds coming through wanting to access services.

M

Michael 40:30

And for anyone that's wanting to come down to PRONTO and get a test at the moment. How do they go about doing that to they need to book an appointment? Can they just walk in the door here at 200 Hoddle Street, what does that kind of look like?



Esh 40:40

We would ideally suggest, jump online, go to our website, which is www.pronto.org.au, and make a booking online. And so we don't make a booking under a doctor unless you are you're symptomatic or you want to access PrEP. If you are not on PrEP, and if you want to get a rapid test, and a sexual health test. Book under 'PRONTO Rapid Tester 1' or 'PRONTO Rapid Tester 2'



Jessie 41:10

Amazing, thank you so much for being with us today Esh, it was a pleasure to have you here.



Esh 41:15

Thank you, Jesse. Thank you, Michael.



Michael 41:16

Thank you!



Jessie 41:17

You're listening to Well Well Well here on JOY 94.9. And for our last segment, I'd really like to utilise Michael's experience here. So Michael, I mean, I might get you to introduce yourself in terms of what you do. But I know that you've got a great involvement with PAN [PrEP Access NOW]. So why don't you kick off by letting us know what pan is about and how it came into fruition?



Michael 41:41

Sure, we'll get into PrEP, specifically probably in a little bit. So PrEP kind of came about around the kind of 2011-2012 kind of era. And then as we got into kind of 2013-2014, there wasn't really any kind of movement happening in Australia on access to PrEP. So a bunch of us from the community kind of all got together to support each other in terms of accessing PrEP, and what that might look like sharing our experiences. So that's kind of how it started as a bit of a like an online Facebook group. And then we kind of got together to support the wider community. So developed a website, a coupon access scheme, which we'll get into in a little bit. But effectively, we're an advocacy organisation for ensuring that everyone has access to PrEP, regardless of any barriers they might have,

be that Medicare access or anything like that their financial status, we want to make sure that everyone has access to it. Yeah, yeah. And I have seen, you know, some of the stuff you do. And it's an amazing initiative, it really, really is an amazing initiative, which we will make sure you have access in links to But well, let's break it down a little bit. Hey, so let's start off with you know, it might be a bit basic, but what is PrEP, Love talking about PrEP! So PrEP is a short acronym for pre-exposure prophylaxis. So to break that down, it's pre exposure prophylaxis. So PRE is before something EXPOSURE is exposure to HIV in this instance, and then PROPHYLAXIS is the prevention of it. So before you have sex, or before you engage in risk at risk HIV activity we're preventing HIV. Yeah, yeah, so it's, um, it all boils down to at least currently taking medication to prevent you from acquiring HIV. If you think about a condom being an external barrier, so it covers a certain area of your body and protect prevents HIV from getting into the body. PrEP works as an internal barrier. So if you were to come into contact with HIV, through sex, or through injecting drugs, or whatever it might be, you're protected, regardless of whether condoms get used. I love that. I haven't heard that explanation explained like that. And I really like it. So I might steal that one. Yeah, so I guess how effective is it and you have explained a little bit, but yeah, maybe give us a bit more detail on how it actually works internally Sure! So what happens with PrEP? So the way the PrEP came about is we took what we already knew from treating people already living with HIV. So there's a myriad of different medications that people living with HIV use to reduce the amount of HIV levels in their blood to such a low level that A) it can't be transmitted to another person. And B) it keeps them incredibly healthy. So what we took from that was, "Well, what if we take that and gave it to people not living with HIV as a way to protect them", which is what we've done. We've chosen this particular combination of medications, because they're super, super easy to take. They have low side effects. We'll probably get into that in a little bit. But they're super, super effective, and they work for the vast majority of people. In terms of effectiveness, it's the most effective tool that you can use as a person not living with HIV at preventing HIV. So it's almost 100% effective When taken as direct. when taken correctly. Yep.



Jessie 44:57

Yeah, absolutely. So you mentioned Little bit about, you know, a few side effects. But I'm sure that there is a possibility that might happen. And you know, it might be a question that are crossing people's minds. Are there any side effects?



Michael 45:11

Very few. As I said that this medication is one that we chose from... not we, like "me, myself." Researchers, clinicians picked this medication because we already knew from

people living with HIV using these drugs, that there were very few side effects. The vast majority of people that start PrEP, don't experience any side effects. It's just like, you've just taken a little nurofen, a little panadol, completely fine, nothing, nothing untoward happens. For a very, very small number of people that do experience side effects. That can be something like a mild upset stomach, some mild headaches, some people report that they have some difficulty sleeping, or some vivid dreams. But the good news is that for again, the vast majority of people, if you do experience those side effects, you generally get them for a week to two weeks, and then it all dissipates as your body gets used to the new medication. Yeah, right. Okay, so yeah, they don't last. Yep. In a very, very, very, very, very small number of people, you might see side effects that lasts a little bit longer. Or some that might make it a little bit challenging for you to take the medication. So things like upset stomach, if that's causing you to, you know, feel unwell, you can always go back to your doctor and talk about, you know, taking it at a different time of the day, taking it with or without food and different strategies to help make it a little bit more manageable. Yes, sure. So I guess one of the other things would be good to know was does it interact with, you know, alcohol, drugs, or other medications? The good thing is, no! When it comes to things like illicit substances, or recreational drugs, and alcohol, so many people, myself included, we've all gotten into a situation where we've imbibed, we've enjoyed ourselves out socially. And then you get into the, into the bedroom, or wherever it is you're having sex, and you know, that can influence your decision as to how you protect yourself, or the kinds of sex you're going to be getting up to. So the fact that it doesn't interact with those things is really great, because it protects you, even if you've gone out and had a few too many to drink, or you've been using chems (drugs) or anything like that.



Jessie 47:12

Really, yeah, it's really so perfect for that.



Michael 47:15

Yeah, there's, there's also a great resource, and we'll probably pop this in the podcast page. It's called the HIV Drug Interactions Checker. It's run by Liverpool University. And you can put things like PrEP into there, and everything from panadol, to orange juice to St. John's Wart, and it will give you a 'green', 'orange' or 'red' light as to whether those things play well together. And the good thing is, if you can chuck prep into there, it will pretty much show no interaction with anything. There are a few small medications that might have some indications. But those are generally mitigated by just taking it a different time of the day, that sort of thing.



Jessie 47:48

Yeah, no, that's really great. And just want to kind of, you know, caveat that this is a really ongoing conversation that someone ought to have with their GP (doctor). Yeah, kind of, yeah, and there is so much information out there. So let's make it really clear, PrEP prevents against HIV. Sure does. However, when it comes to STIs, let's open up that conversation briefly.



Michael 48:11

Yeah, sure. So, PrEP does one thing really well. And that's prevent HIV. Apart from you know, a person living with HIV having an undetectable viral load and being unable to pass on the virus. PrEP is the best thing that you can use as an HIV-negative person to protect yourself. It works regardless of whether you put a condom on or off. The great thing about a condom is that you can use it whenever you want to. But if you forget to use it, if you forget to put it on, it doesn't get used. Whereas I can take my PrEP in the morning or at night whenever I'm taking it and I'm prevented from acquiring HIV no matter what. The other great thing about condoms is that it helps prevent some STIs. Now with that said, it doesn't prevent all STIs all of the time. There are STIs that can be transmitted outside the coverage area of a condom, we know condoms break, and they can fall off or they don't get used properly. They don't get us for the whole session. So if you are using condoms and PrEP, it's still important to make sure that you're going and getting a routine comprehensive STI screen just to make sure that everything's you know, ticking away, everything's hunky dory. So using those two things in tandem can be a really great solution for kind of full broad coverage. But that being said, if you choose not to use a condom, it breaks, you have some sort of some sort of issue, why it doesn't get used, PrEP is going to at least protect you from HIV. And all of those other STI is, while a concern, are a lot more manageable, so you pick up gonorrhoea or chlamydia or something like that. Yeah, you have to go and get a test. You have to get treated. You have to notify your partners, but it's very manageable, whereas HIV is going to be something that's a chronic manageable illness for the rest of your life.



Jessie 49:46

Yeah, so just wanted to point out that it is recommended that we're not saying PrEP is an alternative part of your sexual health regime. It's really an addition to the same idea.



Michael 49:57

It's not about saying you need to use one thing or the other, you know, to talk about cars

for example... When we put airbags into cars we didn't take seatbelts out because both things work really well at doing different things. PrEP works really well. Condoms work really well. dams work really well. The internal condoms work really well. Yeah. U=U (undetectable equals untransmittable) works really well. It's just about picking and choosing the different things that work for you.

J

Jessie 50:25

More tools than ever before! Yeah, I'm loving the analogies, by the way, because you're killing it with that. Okay, so let's get on to it right, because I'm a convert now, right? If I was wanting to access PrEP, or you know, I guess our listeners, especially those who are overseas born men who have sex with men, including trans men, what exactly is the process that goes, you know, just from start to finish actually accessing PrEP? Sure.

M

Michael 50:53

Well, you need to know it's the right tool for you. So pop onto something like PAN or PreEP'D For Change, head on to Thorne Harbour, do a little bit of your research online about what PrEP is, how it works, make sure it sounds like a strategy that's going to work for you. If you can take a pill every day to prevent HIV, it's probably a strategy that's going to work for you. You need to make an appointment with a GP (doctor), it can be your own GP, it doesn't need to be a sexual health specialist. However, there are lots of those around and we'll have links to those in the podcast page. If you had to joy.org.au/wellwellwell. The other thing is you've got to get an HIV test, they'll test you for a couple of other things like STIs, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, and then you've got to get a prescription from your doctor. And you can get this all in one sitting, you don't need to go and get a test, and then wait and then come back and get a negative test. And then get your prescription. Once you've got your prescription, you've got a couple of different options, you can pop down to a local pharmacy, if you've got private health insurance, say you're talking about if someone doesn't have Medicare. If you DO have private health insurance, you can pop down to the pharmacy pick it up and then get reimbursed through your private health cover. You can go online and order it directly from overseas where it's super cheap, it's exact same medication does exactly the same sort of thing. But you can buy it from a country where it's cheaper, say India or or Eswatini (Swaziland) in Africa and get it shipped here. Really, really cheap. You can also access a free coupon, through PAN, if you are unable to do any of those things, the cost of getting PrEP is too much for you, you can get a prep coupon to cover the cost of your PrEP.

J

Jessie 52:35

Yeah, so I just want to mention as well, you know, we say prescription, it's the same as getting a script. So those two can be used interchangeably, just the language there. Yeah, and so the thing about PrEPaccessNOW, it really creates, it's got amazing resources on the pathways to access PrEP, if you are struggling with money, you know, like, you know, it can get quite expensive, or you don't have Medicare, or you don't want to use it overseas health insurance, and it lays it out really clearly. And I just want to say that it's not just like any online, you know, that they've got you obviously have a really, you know, rigorous process in ensuring that the medication or the sites that you trust and are directing people to

M

Michael 53:19

Yeah, and we generally recommend these key specific sites, because this fabulous service in, in the UK called the Dean Street Clinic actually took a lot of these generic medications from other countries, and did rigorous testing just to make sure that all the active ingredients were in there, and all of the medication that's on there passed these tests. So they've been independently verified by people working in the space. That's not just some website saying, Yeah, we sell you HIV medication that turns up and its milk thistle. It's, it's actually what's written on the bottle, and it's super effective. And there's tonnes of people in Australia that access their PrEP that way. And if the medication that arrived wasn't fit for purpose, if it didn't work, we'd see so many more people acquiring HIV, and because they don't, we know that it works. Is this testing continuous? Like do they kind of go back and retest it? They did a major bunch of testing... bin must have been about 2013. And I think they've tested some additional medications since then, as new kind of products have come onto the market. But there was just the one major testing and they test all that kind of when we talk about generic brands, they tested all the major generic brands, the most successful ones.

J

Jessie 54:27

Yeah, yeah, for sure. So when someone gets their script, and all this kind of stuff, so they can jump onto PrEPaccessNOW, there's a shows us the different avenues in which you can access this really clear instructions on you know what you need to upload all this kind of stuff. Now, there's also a coupon scheme?

M

Michael 54:43

Yep. So basically, anyone that buys PrEP medication online, a little bit of that profit goes into a separate kind of account. And then if someone wants to access PrEP and they can't afford it, they just have to apply to us and say, "Hey, I'm a student" or whatever. You just

got to give a reason as to why you can't afford PrEP, and we give you a little coupon code. And when you go to buy your prep online, you just put that code in and it will make sure that the PrEP is dispensed to you for free. So it'll be at no charge, which is great. When you're thinking about things like what Jason and Esh were talking about around if you don't have Medicare, sometimes the biggest barrier can be paying for your doctor's appointment paying for the actual tests to get run. So if we can take the burden off people buying the medication and make sure that at least that element is taken care of. Just makes it less of a blow for most people.



Jessie 55:34

Yeah, great. Thank you so much, Michael. So just a reminder, that is PrEPaccessNOW the website is PAN so pan.org.au. And don't forget about the other services that we have mentioned. There's the PrEP Me clinic at the Alfred, which you can access all these services for free, including subsidised cost on PrEP medication, as well as the Melbourne Sexual Health Centre. So thanks, Michael.



Michael 56:01

Thank you, Jesse. It's been fabulous to talk about what I love, which is PrEP.



Jessie 56:04

No, absolutely. Likewise, you are listening to Well Well Well here on JOY 94.9.



Intro 56:12

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