

Reflections on the concept of HIV treatment optimism by young gay men (YGM) in the context of rising HIV incidence in Vancouver

[Is HAART Optimism a reality for gay men or is it an academic premise?]

Mary Lou Miller,

Arn Schilder, Chris Buchner, Steve Martindale, Keith Chan, Kevin JP Craib, Michael V. O'Shaughnessy, Robert S. Hogg, Patricia Spittal.

The Vanguard Project

British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS

Vancouver, BC.



BACKGROUND

The participants were recruited from a prospective study of over 1,000 young gay and bisexual men from the Vancouver area

HIV seroincidence increased three-fold within the Vanguard cohort in the year 2000 compared to the previous four years, and so far appears to have plateaued in the year 2001.



DEFINITION

HAART/HIV optimism:

- "New treatments will take the worry out of sex."
- "If every HIV-positive person took the new treatments, the AIDS epidemic would be over."
- "People with undetectable viral load don't need to worry so much about infecting others with HIV."
- "HIV/AIDS is a less serious threat than it used to be because of new treatments."



METHODS

- A qualitative study nested within the Vanguard project
- 26 participants have been recruited, 13 of whom are HIV-positive and 13 HIV-negative.
- Participants are interviewed up to four times over 12 months
- Textual data are coded, managed and explored using NUDIST qualitative research software.
- We explore the experience with abuse, sex, family, community, substance use, beliefs about condom use and cum, and HAART optimism.





RESPONSES FROM HIV-NEGATIVE MEN

- "It hasn't changed how, well, what my sexual practices are. I mean I'm not kind of being more risky or doing things differently just because they're making better medications."
- "I don't know a whole lot about what each drug does...but like if you've got it you've got it...I always relate it to getting pregnant...you can always get it on the first try."
(HIV-negative guy with positive partner)
- "No like my, it hasn't made me less, like I don't think that getting AIDS isn't as serious as I did before. You know, people know that if they smoke chances are greatly increased that they're gonna get cancer...yet people still smoke."



A Young Gay Man's Reality:

"I was a little more cautious about having sex, yeah it probably has decreased. Why, I don't know. Other times it just kind of like...I'm often with my fuckbuddy where sometimes we don't use condoms and I think that's not a great idea."





RESPONSES FROM HIV-POSITIVE MEN

- "Once you are infected you're infected. If two guys are gonna have sex who are positive, I still say practice safe sex."
- "I know there's some people that are more carefree 'cause they think that HIV is stopping now. I don't think people should be that carefree."
- "I think some people are a bit deluded thinking that you know the drugs that are out now are the solution to the problem."





Emerging Conflict for HIV Positive Men

- "I don't care if I have HIV 'cause there's these drugs out there. I used to be that way until I got diagnosed and then that was it. My whole outlook on life has changed."
- "Well it's good to know those drugs are out there in case I ever need them."



For Positive Men, the Drugs are All About Fears.

- "Being fucked or fucking the likelihood if you have a low viral load of passing it on I don't think is as high as if your viral load is high."
- "A positive partner might have a different strain than I have and why chance mixing the two together because then you are just adding fuel to the fire."
- "Consideration of viral load and resistant strains are an external concept that is still collateral to the process of reasoning."
- "I assumed he was on medication turned out he wasn't but had a high viral load...why the assumption? It wasn't discussed at all."



Some Realities of Risk

"...I mean when I got infected the guy who infected me was had a huge viral load. It was in the fall of '94 and he had a huge virus. That was before they even knew what viral load was. And he like stuck his dick in me for like 30 seconds and blew his load and left. He was mad at me it was at a bathhouse and he was mad at me 'cause I was there having fun and he came up behind me and I was having sex with this other guy and he did it. I remember looking at him. I said 'Why did you do that?' and he just went, 'Fuck you' and walked away."





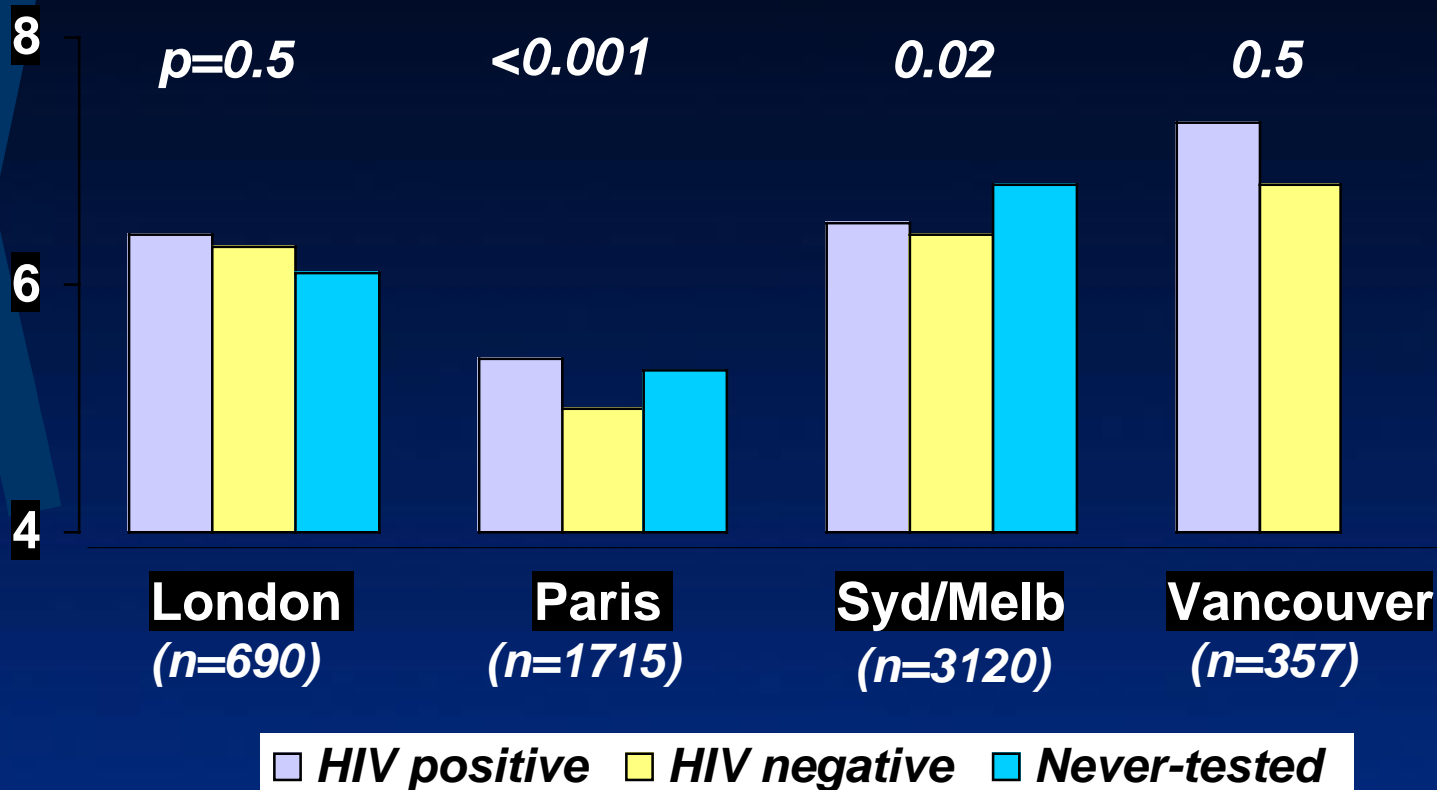
Top 10 reasons for not using condoms during RAI with casual partners reported by HIV-negative men

Reason	Percent
1. We are/were both HIV-negative	55
2. At the time I just didn't care	45
3. It feels better without a condom	40
4. The sex was too hot	40
5. It was more intimate	30
6. I was drunk or stoned at the time	30
7. We got carried away	20
8. We didn't have a condom at the time	20
9. I wanted to try it	15
10. I don't know / No reason	15

(Piaseczna, Craib, et al. JAIDS, 2001)



Mean optimism score by HIV status



SUMMARY

- For HIV-negative men, the idea of HAART optimism is irrelevant to their decisions regarding risk taking.
- For HIV-positive men, HAART is a source of fear and conflict.
- In order to understand rising HIV incidence, we are better to begin with understanding the cultural context in which risks are taken.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Restore funding to programmes such as YouthQuest, a BC province-wide support organization for coming-out youth.
- Health interventionists must incorporate gay men's cultural beliefs into their strategies.

