‘The ART of Synergy’:
Qualitative study on barriers to HIV treatment adherence among PLWH in Central America

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BACKGROUND

Eligibility criteria and sub-optimal coverage inhibit many people living with HIV (PLWH) in Central America from receiving the health benefits of Antiretroviral Therapy (ART). Social, structural, and individual factors also impede effective treatment and care. Across Central American countries, between 33-69% of PLWH abandon ART within one year of initiation. In 2012, as part of the USAID-funded Combination Prevention Program, PASMO conducted formative research to explore barriers and strategies for achieving holistic treatment adherence among PLWH.

METHODS

A study conducted in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Costa Rica and Panama among PLWH included—men who have sex with men (MSM), transgender women (TW), female sex workers (FSW), men at risk (MAR) and women from the general population. 61 in-depth life histories and 20 focus groups were conducted to identify key moments in the treatment continuum when adherence was compromised and to generate consensus regarding the key challenges. From those, 21 life histories and focus groups were conducted among MSM. The life history approach allowed for an emic account of the facts bringing new meaning to them.

RESULTS

Some study participants reported receiving ART from medical providers, psychological support with counselors, and social support in PLWH support groups. MSM reported better adherence to ART when having received not only medical attention, but also psychological and social support. However, the study identified a lack of synergy among all three areas of care with little evidence of coordination among medical providers, counselors and support groups.

First, we need to see adherence to treatment as a complex process in time that should be seen from a holistic perspective.

“...it is a process, we don’t do it through the health system, but through the organization, so people empower themselves little by little, and develop better adherence and better control over their health.” MSM, Panama.

“...there should be more support, not only the health area [but also] psychology, [meaning] a holistic attention.” MSM, El Salvador.

As a holistic process there are different mechanisms in which different components play important and complementary roles. There has been criticism of people when they feel they didn’t get the benefits of being exposed to particular components.

“I feel a need to complain [argue with the psychologist], he never transferred me to a support group, even knowing I was a rebel and didn’t take my medication...” MSM, Costa Rica.

“[Participating in a support group means] talking about your own experience makes you think over the issues.” MSM, El Salvador.

CONCLUSIONS

As traditionally seen, medical attention has been the core of treatment and adherence. Then, the psychological or mental health perspective was included as an important variable in adherence, and more recently the social aspect has being included as an important component.

“It was a process, at first it was very difficult, there was no psychological support.” MSM, Costa Rica.

“I have always attended my doctor appointments, the doctors and the psychologist have always support me...” MSM, Nicaragua.

“Yes I have a support group, [some of us] collaborate at the clinic, at the hospital, and we [collaborate] with the doctor... and the psychologist.” MSM, Panama.

For some people, support groups have been essential for coping with their condition, nevertheless, not everyone perceives the important role they have from the perspective of social support, development of social networks with political power from civil society.

“...[my two support groups] were my two main pillars...” MSM, El Salvador.

“[Attending] support groups exposes you to the reality, because the doctor [only] might ask you if you have taken your medication.” MSM, Nicaragua.

“Until I got sick, I realized the need to look for help so I went to the hospital. The support group and the hospital.” MSM, El Salvador.

Figure 1. Shows the synergy needed from a holistic perspective to develop adherence.

Treatment should be redefined in a holistic way (bio-psycho-social). Once treatment is redefined as a holistic process, adherence to ART will become more meaningful and desirable for patients. In this sense, medical appointments, psychological therapy and participation in support groups should be part of treatment. Synergy in these areas will facilitate adherence and hence improved health conditions.

Key Terms: Holistic treatment, synergy, MSM
Theme: Innovations in modelling and bio-psycho-social theory
Track: Engagement in the Continuum of Care
Key Populations/Settings: Men who have sex with men (MSM)