

HIV risk perceptions among women participating in a microbicide feasibility study in Mwanza, Tanzania: implications for future uptake of vaginal microbicides

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Objectives: To understand perceptions of HIV risk among women participating in a microbicide feasibility study and the implications for future uptake of a successful product.

Methods: 1573 women working in bars, restaurants, guesthouses or hotels, or as food or alcohol vendors, were enrolled in a feasibility study in preparation for a phase III vaginal microbicide trial in Mwanza, northern Tanzania between 2001 and 2004. At enrolment 26% were found to be HIV positive. During the enrolment interview, women were asked about their knowledge and perceptions of HIV risk. During in-depth interviews with 15 women concerning experiences of the study the women were asked in depth about their HIV perceptions.

Results: Quantitative findings revealed that the majority of the women had good knowledge about HIV (98% knew that HIV is transmitted by vaginal sex and 80% knew correct use of condoms prevented transmission). When asked about HIV risk 80% of women reported that the perceived 'people like themselves' to be at risk of HIV due to partner's unfaithfulness (80%), and not using condoms (51%). Qualitative findings confirmed this and revealed that women also perceived themselves to be at risk due to poverty, gender inequalities and alcohol use, and they attributed low condom use to partner resistance.

Conclusions: Given that knowledge of HIV was generally good, women attributed their own HIV risk to sociocultural factors, particularly their inability to insist on condom use due to gender inequalities. This indicates that the availability of an effective vaginal microbicide could help women reduce their own vulnerability due to partner behaviour. However, given the influence of wider sociocultural factors on risk perceptions it is important to explore how these will impact on microbicide acceptability and conversely how this female controlled method of prevention may change risk perceptions and, ultimately, behaviour. This is being explored during the clinical trial.

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