Support grows for ‘essential’ HIV prevention drug

The World Health Organization’s decision to endorse PrEP as an ‘essential medicine’ increases pressure on UK governments to follow Scotland’s lead and make the controversial treatment available on the NHS

By Jennifer Trueland
The HIV prevention treatment PrEP has been hailed a game-changer, with the potential to transform people’s lives and save the NHS hundreds of thousands of pounds per patient in lifetime costs.

But it has also been condemned for undermining safe-sex messages and encouraging people to take sexual risks, such as not using condoms. And while it is available in some parts of the UK, there is resistance to making it available routinely on the NHS.

However, the discussion around PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) could be changing. The World Health Organization has announced that it is now on its ‘essential medicines’ list – an endorsement reserved for those considered ‘essential for addressing the most important public health needs’.

**Trial awaited**

This follows a decision in April to make PrEP available on the NHS in Scotland for those at risk of HIV, although the details are still being worked out. After initially refusing to fund PrEP, NHS Wales also agreed in April to run a trial on its use – something that campaigners say will at least give some people access to it in the process.

The situation in England is complex. NHS England initially said that ‘as a public health measure’ PrEP was the responsibility of local authorities rather than the health service, but it has now agreed to fund a large trial involving 10,000 people. This was announced after a legal ruling that the NHS and local authorities have responsibility for PrEP, although neither is obliged to pay for it. As yet there are no details of how or when the trial will happen.

In Northern Ireland, former health minister Michelle O’Neill said the health department was looking at the drug, and any decision would be based on ‘the best clinical evidence’.

Terrence Higgins Trust director of clinical services Liz Porter, who formerly worked for the organisation as a community contraception and sexual health nurse, and as a regional and central nurse manager, believes the WHO decision underlines the case for making PrEP available on the NHS.

‘What we’re hearing from people who call THT Direct (the charity’s helpline) is that PrEP is a real game-changer: it’s life-changing,’ she says. ‘It allows people to take control of their sexual health. They know they are probably going to remain HIV negative. It’s helping to tackle stigma – it’s absolutely massive.’

‘Across the London clinics where PrEP is used, HIV infections have reduced by 40%. That reduction is down to a range of prevention measures, and PrEP is an important part of it. It would be great to see the same results in communities across England, not just in London.’

There is a huge cost saving too, she says. ‘If you get people on board with PrEP, there’s a lifetime saving of £360,000 per person, and the savings could be even higher because many people won’t need to stay on it for life.’

This is an argument that, to an extent, has been won in Scotland. In April, the Scottish Medicines Consortium (SMC), which, like the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) in England, makes decisions on whether new treatments should be funded on the NHS, gave the green light to PrEP, although individual health boards will decide how to make that happen in practice.

**PrEP’s progress**

» PrEP – pre-exposure prophylaxis – involves taking a course of HIV drugs before sex to reduce the risk of getting HIV.

» The first PrEP drug to be licensed is Truvada, which is a combination of emtricitabine and tenofovir disoproxil fumarate.

» PrEP works because there is enough of the drug to block HIV if it gets into the body.

» On 6 June 2017 the World Health Organization added PrEP to its essential medicines list – meaning that it considers it ‘essential for addressing the most important public health needs’.

» The UK’s PROUD study reported an 86% reduction in HIV infections in gay men taking PrEP.

» That means PrEP prevented more than 17 out of every 20 HIV infections that would have otherwise occurred.

» According to the Terrence Higgins Trust, people who are at high risk of getting HIV should have access to PrEP, including gay and bisexual men, black Africans, transgender people, and those in a relationship with an HIV-positive partner who is not on successful treatment.

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The SMC decision followed concerted campaigning by a group of organisations including HIV charity Waverley Care, the Terrence Higgins Trust, HIV Scotland and the National Aids Trust.

Alastair Rose, a former urology nurse who is a health improvement worker with Waverley Care, believes the partnership approach taken in Scotland was key to achieving success. ‘There was real community engagement, and the statutory structures came together,’ he says, adding that the campaigners’ consultation process engaged with 300 people. Strong evidence from a study of PrEP use, called the PROUD study, was also crucial, as was testimony from potential users of the drug.

In its advice on the PrEP product Truvada, which is made up of two anti-HIV drugs, NICE says there have been ‘concerns that sexual behaviour could become more high-risk if people are taking PrEP’, and that it will be important to monitor data at a population level to see if there is a negative impact.

Risk taking
However, NICE also says that providing PrEP may increase access to other health services, such as HIV testing, screening for sexually transmitted infection and hepatitis B, and to support services for high-risk sexual behaviour and recreational drug and alcohol use.

It’s important to note, says Ms Porter, that trial evidence so far shows no increase in rates of sexually transmitted infections among people using PrEP, suggesting that it does not make people more likely to take risks.

Mr Rose cautions against thinking of PrEP as a magic bullet, saying it has to be part of a wider sexual health strategy. ‘The difficulty is that this is just for HIV; there are other infections out there. It’s definitely not time to throw the condoms in the bin yet. It’s about encouraging people to have a healthy sex life, and it’s about keeping people safe. [PrEP] is an amazing tool, but it’s not the be-all and end-all.’

He says not everyone at increased risk of HIV will be eligible for PrEP in Scotland even after the SMC’s ruling. The drug – which is likely to cost the NHS around £4,300 per patient per year if taken daily – will be restricted to those who meet criteria, such as being HIV negative and in a sexual relationship with a person who is HIV positive, and who has a detectable viral load (a measure of the amount of HIV in the blood) or having had two to three episodes of unprotected anal sex, with a strong likelihood of it happening again.

Ms Porter is urging the NHS in England not to delay any further in setting up the trial, and providing details on resourcing and recruitment. She says people desperate for the drug are buying it from the internet, with all the risks that entails. ‘You don’t know what you’re getting, and where’s the follow-up?’

Message for nurses
Nurses, particularly those working in primary care, could well find they are asked about PrEP by patients eager to access it. ‘The best advice is to contact their local genitourinary medicine service for advice,’ says Ms Porter. ‘Care for people at risk of HIV is still patchy, unfortunately, and we need to raise awareness of the fact that we can take action to minimise risks.

‘The message for nurses is that this is something really positive: HIV is preventable. WHO’s decision will add leverage to the argument to make it more widely available across the UK.’

For Mr Rose, a gay man who describes himself as an activist, it’s a question of social justice. ‘Gay men are so disproportionately affected by HIV that it stigmatises the sex they have. Allowing us to have something that makes sex pleasurable for us is part of tackling that.’

Jennifer Trueland is a freelance health writer