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Impact of Antiretroviral Shortages in HIV Therapy and Prevention Uptake in Australia

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Abstract

Background and Aims: Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) remains a critical public health issue in Australia. Access to antiretroviral therapy (ART) and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) is vital for both treatment and prevention and is primarily facilitated through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS). In 2023–2024, national shortages affected tenofovir with emtricitabine products, raising concerns about continuity of care and HIV prevention. This study aimed to examine changes in ART and PrEP dispensing during the shortage period and explored potential impacts on HIV diagnostic testing behaviour.

Design and Methods: This retrospective observational study used publicly available aggregated PBS and Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) data from January 2023 to December 2024. Monthly trends in PBS dispensing rates for all tenofovir with emtricitabine item codes were analysed. Additionally, MBS data on HIV code claims were used to assess any changes in diagnostic testing during the shortage. The impact of regulatory interventions, including Section 19A approvals (approval for important and supply of overseas registered products), was also evaluated.

Results: Overall there was a 42% reduction in PrEP dispensing during the antiretroviral shortage period. tenofovir/emtricitabine item codes. There was a seven-month delay between initial PrEP dispensing declines and listing of an overseas registered PrEP tenofovir/emtricitabine product via Section 19A for dispensation on the PBS in October 2024. Despite this HIV diagnostic testing volumes remained relatively stable, suggesting minimal impact on testing behaviours during the shortage.

Conclusions: Medicine shortages had a significant impact on PrEP access in Australia, potentially undermining HIV prevention efforts. Although HIV treatment continuity appears to have been maintained, the persistent decline in PrEP dispensing following the shortage underscores the vulnerability of preventive health interventions to supply chain disruptions. Timely regulatory action, including Section 19A approvals, is important to enhance access to essential medicines during shortages.