

Understanding and managing new HIV diagnoses in members of “generation Z” (1996-2010) in Milan, Italy: project GenZ HIV-support

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Introduction/Summary

- “Generation Z” (born 1996-2010), was not alive during the first phase of the HIV pandemic, characterized by gloomy mass communication.
- This generation has peculiar social features, well known in the marketing context, but has still not been well characterized in relation to chronic communicable disease.
- Age 16-24 has been associated to poor treatment adherence and complications of chronic medical treatment (i.e. kidney transplant graft). Gen-Zers are also more likely to have anxiety/depression disorders.
- PLWH aged 16-24 name stigmatizing social norms and troublesome coping as barriers to treatment.
- These items are typically tackled in psychological interviews, which are mentioned in the Italian HIV guidelines as a tool to prevent loss-to-follow-up, but not routinely offered by the Italian national healthcare.
- Herein, we describe the gen-Z population of our HIV clinic in Milan, Italy, with qualitative results from Project GenZ HIV-support, providing psychologic support into the outpatient clinic context to people aged 18-24 receiving HIV diagnosis.

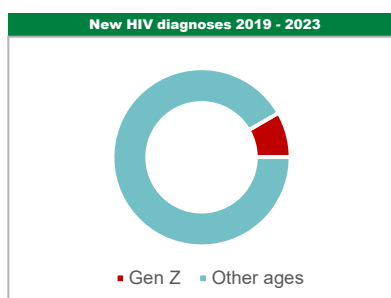
Methods

- Single-center aggregated data of patients born 1996-2010 receiving HIV diagnosis between 01/2019 and 12/2023.
- Newly-diagnosed PLWH were offered SF-36 questionnaire to test health-related QoL was “above average” if mean score was > 64.40.
- Psychologic support (through a qualified clinical psychologist provided by ANLAIDS-Sezione Lombarda) within 30 days from HIV diagnosis started in January 2023 within a prospective observational study investigating adherence to appointments as outcome.
- Non-adherence was defined as ≥2/6 skipped appointments in the first year after diagnosis

Results

BASELINE CHARACTERISTICS

- A total 18/216 (8.3%) individuals newly diagnosed with HIV in 2019-2023 at IRCCS Policlinico were gen-Zers. 3 received HIV diagnosis in 2019, 2 in 2020, 3 in 2021, 4 in 2022, 6 in 2023



- Median age at diagnosis was 21 years, all had sexual route of transmission (70% were MSM), 60% were foreign-born (5 African, 6 South American).
- Of 18, 33% had primary infection (diagnosed through acute retroviral syndrome, compatible western blot and/or previous negative test within 6 months), and none had AIDS.
- Median CD4 count at diagnosis was 383/mcL, median viral load was 5 log10.
- Half were routinely tested for HIV, but had not considered PrEP. For the other half, the positive test was the first HIV test.

HEALTH-RELATED QUALITY OF LIFE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELLING ACCEPTANCE

- Mean SF-36 score was 77.09.
- Psychologic support was offered to 6 individuals as the project started in 2023.
- Of 6, counselling was accepted by 5 individuals.

ADHERENCE AT 12 MONTHS FOLLOW UP

- Non-adherence to visits in the first year of follow up was 25%
- while all were self reported drug-adherent.

Results/2

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS FROM PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELLING

- Counselling revealed common themes of emotional paralysis, with each person seemingly having initial difficulties opening up to conversation.
- Feelings, when expressed, gravitated towards anxiety and depression.
- HIV diagnosis was never the focus of conversation, and not mentioned as a cause of distress. Reasons of such banalization seemed to be a strong trust in the internet and social media, which are chosen routes of communication and information.
- Psychological counselling was appreciated mostly as a way to retrieve information unavailable online, the lack of which was commonly perceived as an emergency.

Conclusions

- As of 2023, more than 8% HIV diagnoses at our HIV clinic in Milan were in gen-Zers, a population still to be fully characterized as outpatient service users. As expected, out of the 5 years studied, the last - 2023 - was the year with most diagnoses in gen-Zers.
- The study is limited by its monocentric nature and small numbers.
- Population was mostly composed of foreign MSM, with at least half individuals seemingly aware of HIV risk, while not choosing protected sex or PrEP.
- Of note, 33% of Gen-Zers had primary HIV infection at presentation, a proportion way larger compared to individuals of other ages receiving HIV diagnosis in the same time and setting.
- Adherence to outpatient visits was poor, while drug adherence was adequate.
- Qualitatively, gen-Zers receiving counselling seemed in need of authentic relationships – irrespective of professional roles – to maintain a functional therapeutic alliance.
- These results may guide primary and secondary public health interventions.

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