LETTER

Retention challenge in an MSM cohort in Suzhou, China

Many surveys conducted in recent years have reported escalating rates of HIV infection among MSM (men who have sex with men), but data on HIV incidence garnered from prospective cohort studies in mainland China is limited, especially in southern China. A prospective cohort study consisting of three cross-sectional surveys administered to MSM that all used the same protocol and methodology was conducted in Suzhou, which is one of China’s most highly developed areas and located on the bank of the Yangtze River.

As a low retention rate may affect the representativeness of the HIV incidence data in the target population and limit the extrapolation of the results, this cohort study was in some way not very successful even though we had fully considered that MSM were hard to reach due to the universal discrimination against the MSM population in Chinese society, and had conducted this cohort with a detailed retention plan accordingly.

However, this misfortune may actually be a blessing in disguise. Through expounding upon the probable factors involved in loss to follow-up at the 12-month visit, some improved indicators and suggestions for later long-term prospective cohort studies were thus put forward. In our study, sexual behavioural characteristics were not found to be associated with loss to follow-up; significant predictors of loss to follow-up included having a higher education level (OR 0.11, 95% CI 0.01 to 0.88), having tested positive for syphilis at baseline (OR 0.33, 95% CI 0.12 to 0.95), having received sexually transmitted disease (STD) services in the past year (OR 0.26, 95% CI 0.11 to 0.61) and having been retained in the cohort at the 6-month visit (OR 0.18, 95% CI 0.06 to 0.51).

The results suggest that using traditional follow-up methods such as telephone, email and QQ (an online communication tool in China, similar to MSN), outreach contacts could also be used to strengthen social bonds with all enrolled participants, especially ones with lower education levels and those without an STD infection at or before the baseline survey. As a preliminary attempt at a prospective cohort study of MSM in Jiangsu province, the predictors of loss to follow-up were found to have actual and far-reaching significance for the development of relevant HIV/AIDS prevention policies and measures for MSM populations.

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Interview and volunteer counselling and testing procedures were conducted at a conveniently located HIV clinic, where blood was also drawn to test for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Samples were first screened for HIV antibodies by ELISA, and then confirmed with a Western Blot Assay. Syphilis screening was performed using the Rapid Plasma Reagin Test and plasma specimens that were positive were confirmed by Treponema Pallidum Particle Agglutination (TPPA) Assay. Participants with a positive test result at any follow-up visit were referred to medical and social services and were asked to leave the study.

Contributors All authors have contributed significantly and all authors are in agreement with the content of the manuscript. ZHP and RBY were the project coordinators who designed the whole research frame and provided the funding support; they were responsible for the project implementation and supervised all aspects of data processing and analysis. XC was responsible for the epidemiological research and conducted the investigations to collect the original data. NW coordinated the projection and provided guidance for the epidemiological analyses throughout the whole study. All authors concurred with the submission and subsequent revisions submitted by the corresponding authors.

Funding This work was supported in part by National Natural Science Foundation of China (61001288); ‘National ST Major Project Foundation of China’ (No. 2012ZX10001-001 and No. 2011ZX10004-902).

Competing interests None.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

Accepted 18 March 2012

Sex Transm Infect 2012;88:1.

doi:10.1136/sextrans-2011-050358

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Sex Transm Infect published online April 17, 2012
doi: 10.1136/sextrans-2011-050358

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P<NPublished online April 17, 2012 in advance of the print journal.

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