

Factors Contributing to the Risk and Vulnerability to HIV Infection among Individuals with Spinal Cord Injuries (SCI) in South Africa

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Abstract : Background: HIV/AIDS has made a huge impact on human development and sexual reproductive habits in this century in the world and especially in sub-Saharan Africa. It has only recently been acknowledged that HIV/AIDS has an equal if not greater effect on or threat to people with disabilities. Survivors of traumatic spinal cord injury (SCI) with resultant disability are incorrectly believed to be sexually inactive, unlikely to use drugs or alcohol and at less risk of violence or rape than their non-disabled peers. This group can thus be described as economically, educationally and socially disadvantaged, which in itself, suggest that they are a high-risk group for HIV infection. Objectives: Thus, the overall objective of this study was to assess the factors that exacerbate the risk and vulnerability of individuals with spinal cord injuries to HIV infection in order to develop a more effective HIV intervention. Methodology: This paper reports on the cross-sectional data gathered from individuals with a traumatic spinal cord injury in 4 conveniently selected provinces in South Africa. Data was collected by means of self-administered questionnaires. The questionnaire consisted of various sections requesting for information on Demographics; HIV-Knowledge (HIV- KQ-18); Sexual behaviours; sexual communication, and negotiation skills and Self-efficacy to refuse sex. Results: The majority of the study sample was males (72.7%) with a mean age of 34.6 years. The majority reported lifetime sexual intercourse (92.4%) but only 31.8% reported condom use with last sexual intercourse. Low level of HIV knowledge, and being male were the strongest predictor of risky sexual behaviours in this sample. Conclusion: Significant numbers of individuals with spinal cord injuries are thus engaging in risky sexual behaviours pointing to a need to strengthen comprehensive sexual health education to increase access to HIV testing, promote safe sex and condom use among this group.

Keywords : Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), individuals with spinal cord injuries, risky sexual behaviours, HIV risk factors, sub-saharan Africa

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