Outrage Over HIV Ads on Facebook

More than 50 AIDS and LGBT groups demand the tech giant remove “dangerous and misleading” PrEP ads.

December 9, 2019 By Trent Straube

More than 50 HIV and LGBT groups are urging Facebook to remove “dangerous and misleading” ads that they claim promote fear and misinformation regarding Truvada as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). The groups—including GLAAD, the PrEP4All Collaboration, AIDS United and NMAC (formerly the National Minority AIDS Council)—released a public letter to Facebook chairman and CEO Mark Zuckerberg, according to a press statement on GLAAD.org.

LGBT and HIV groups claim ads like this promote misinformation about PrEP.Courtesy of GLAAD.org

You can read the full letter and the list of co-signatories here. The letter reads in part:

> "Using Facebook's and Instagram's targeted advertising programs, various law firms are attempting to recruit gay and bisexual men who use Truvada PrEP as an HIV preventative to join a lawsuit, claiming that the drug has caused harmful side effects in this patient population, specifically bone density and kidney issues. By focusing on 'Truvada' and PrEP—rather than 'tenofovir disoproxil fumarate' (or TDF) and HIV-positive individuals who use it as an antiviral—the law firms' advertisements are scaring away at-risk HIV-negative people from the leading drug that blocks HIV infections. This is despite numerous studies underscoring the safety of TDF in HIV-negative PrEP users.
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> "Leading public health officials, medical professionals and dedicated PrEP navigators and outreach coordinators have shared that these advertisements on Facebook and Instagram are being directly cited by at-risk community members expressing heightened fears about taking PrEP. This issue goes beyond misinformation, as it puts real people's lives in imminent danger."

GLAAD contacted Facebook last month about the ads, but the tech giant confirmed it would not remove the ads.

LGBT and HIV groups claim ads like this promote misinformation about PrEP.Courtesy of GLAAD.org

Devon Kearns, a Facebook spokeswoman, told The Washington Post that third-party fact-checkers looked at the ads in question and did not deem them to be false. What's more, personal-injury

lawyers claim that the data support their ads.

That is likely because when Truvada, which is comprised of two different drugs, is taken as treatment by people living with HIV, it has been associated with serious side-effects, potentially when it is used with other meds. In fact, several lawsuits against Gilead Sciences, which makes Truvada, allege exactly this.

However, as the Washington Post points out, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes that "no serious side effects have been observed" when Truvada is taken as PrEP. (To learn more about Truvada, including potential side effects, see this POZ roundup on Truvada or click #Truvada.)

The nuances can be lost on potential and current PrEP users, who may be scared away from the best biomedical HIV prevention available. Demetre Daskalakis, MD, MPH, deputy commissioner for the Division of Disease Control of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, has witnessed this first-hand. As he recounted to the Post: "Four of my seven PrEP patients came in and said, 'How could you be putting me on this medication that's so unsafe? My Instagram ads say so.'"

The HIV and LGBT groups that signed the public letter to Zuckerberg demanded that:

- Facebook and Instagram immediately remove the advertisements outlined above that are harming public health;

- Facebook and Instagram be transparent with users and the LGBTQ community on their advertising policy around misinformation stating that "in certain circumstances" Facebook prohibits ads that include "claims debunked by organizations with particular expertise";

- Facebook commit to a review and potential update of current advertising policies to prevent false or misleading public health statements from reaching users.

"We have a wealth of documented reports from frontline prevention experts raising the alarm on these ads and have been met with infuriating responses from Facebook about their vague and shifting advertising policies," said Peter Staley, a cofounder of the PrEP4All Collaboration, in the GLAAD press release. "Since they also blocked pro-PrEP ads from a leading AIDS prevention group, I'm beginning to wonder if the company could care less about the spread of HIV among gay men."

Staley was referring to a campaign by AIDS service organization Apicha that was banned this fall. For details—and to see the ads—read "Banned by Facebook! What Could Be Wrong With These

PrEP Ads?" For related news, be sure to read Staley's POZ Blog, notably the post titled "Privilege and Profit Corrupt the PrEP Access Debate." And to learn more about PrEP4All's national action plan, see the POZ article "Here's How We Can Get Universal Access to PrEP."

PrEP reduces the risk of contracting HIV by 99% in men who have sex with men. And maintaining an undetectable viral load renders HIV untransmittable 100% of the time, a fact referred to as U=U. For more details, see "How Well Do U=U and PrEP Work? The CDC Updates Its Answers." You can also learn about transmission risks, prevention and treatment in the POZ HIV/AIDS Basics.

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