PrEP Arrives in the Philippines ... for Some

Project PrEPPY is a pilot study for men who have sex with men and for transgender women. Results could inform future policy.

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Enrollment has already started for Project PrEPPY (PrEP Philippines). The pilot project brings pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP, a daily antiretroviral pill to prevent HIV) to the Philippines in an effort to halt the rapid spread of HIV among men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender women.

The Philippines is among the first countries in Asia to try PrEP. Though it is not available nationwide, this study may help change that.

The collaborative project is led by an international team of experts from various backgrounds and nongovernmental organizations, including the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for the Western Pacific, the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine (RITM) and LoveYourself, an LGBT community organization based in Manila, with support from amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research, according to an amfAR press release.

Although the national HIV rate in the Philippines is relatively low, it is growing fast among the MSM and transgender populations—who make up 85 percent of new HIV cases. About 26 people are diagnosed each day in the country.

Some of the main factors fueling the HIV epidemic among MSM in the Philippines include social stigma and legal barriers that limit access to condoms and HIV testing and counseling for those under 18.

“Current national HIV prevention policies are not tailored to address the specific needs of those who are most vulnerable right now, even though four out of five people with HIV in the Philippines are MSM,” said Chris Lagman, deputy director of LoveYourself and co–principal investigator of the study.

For the program, 200 HIV-negative MSM and transgender women at risk of infection will be offered free PrEP at LoveYourself’s two clinics in Manila.

The two-year project will include the integration of HIV prevention services, including routine HIV and sexually transmitted infection testing, intensive patient education on PrEP, treatment preparedness and adherence support and peer support.

Results from the study will inform national policies and guidelines on the potential for the scaling up and wider implementation of PrEP as an HIV prevention option in the Philippines.

“The HIV epidemic in the Philippines is expanding at an alarming rate,” said WHO country representative Gundo Weiler, MD, in the press release. “We must explore every option that can prevent further transmission—PrEP is one promising additional method in our prevention arsenal.”

In the United States, PrEP is celebrating an anniversary this month. For more, read “As PrEP Turns Five, the HIV Prevention Pill Is a Major Success.”

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