Care pathways and barriers to HIV treatment among migrant people living with HIV in Quebec, Canada

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Background

In Quebec, Canada, migrant people living with HIV (mPLWH) who hold a temporary visa (study or work) or have no legal status are unable to access public health insurance. Therefore, they cannot obtain low-cost antiretroviral treatment. This study examines the care pathway of mPLWH from their arrival in Canada until they receive treatment.

Methods

- Semi-structure qualitative individual interviews
- Interviews in English, Spanish or French
- mPLWH without drug coverage
- Between Aug 2022 and Sept 2023
- Audio recorded and transcribed
- Thematic content analysis

Results (n=10)

Participant profile

Median age [IQR]
37 [30–42]

Gender
2 women
8 men

Origin
3 Africa
7 Latin America

Visa
5 study permit
5 work permit

Barriers to access to care

Lack of information

> Honestly, before coming to Canada, I was really worried about my health because I didn't know what to do here, [...] That's why I hired consultants to help me, because I couldn't find any information on the Internet about my health.
>
> — Man, student permit, 34, Latin America

Economy

> Not only am I an international student, so in general we focus more with our studies, we can't work much, we're limited to 20 hours a week in a student job, so at most that's going to make me $1,000 or $1,200 a month, and that can't even buy me a 6th of my medication.
>
> — Woman, student permit, 27, Africa

Migration status

> The root cause is that we all share the same thing. We have a disease, which is getting worse because the Canadian system is like this: it doesn't allow a person with certain statuses, such as an immigrant, whether as a worker or a student, to have the same access to care as a Canadian, a citizen.
>
> — Man, student permit, 40, Latin America

Language

> To tell you the truth, right now I don't know who to ask for my treatment. I know there's a program called MAX. I'll have to call them and see if they understand what I'm explaining. But the problem is that I'm going to have to dial number one for English or number two for French, but I don't have the option "Dial number three for Spanish". Obviously, this puts me in a difficult position.
>
> — Man, work permit, 44, Latin America

Consequences for people

Stress/anxiety

> What I'm saying is that a Canadian... not that he doesn't have psychological worries, but it won't be comparable to someone who has to worry all the time about how he's going to take care of himself, how he's going to take care of his health so he doesn't end up in a situation where he can't get out of it. For example, if I have a health problem unrelated to my situation, it's going to cost me an arm and a leg, that's for sure. So that's an extra stress...
>
> — Man, 25, student permit, Africa

Stigma

> As someone who arrived with HIV, I didn't feel I had the right to go to the hospital to find out who could take care of me. I told myself you're a foreigner, you've got HIV, don't ask for more than you've got. And that's really what I felt personally, I don't know if others felt it, but the fact of having this stigma, not open, because it's not open, but it's there, means that many don't know where to go, afraid even to open their mouths. Because we all know that if you open your mouth, you don't know what the consequences will be. Are they going to tell you: *"Oh* no, you're going to cost too much in Canada, maybe it's better you go home*…"*
>
> — Woman, 20, work permit, Africa

Sense of hopelessness, stigma, fatigue…

Facilitators

- Community-based organisations
- Healthcare

Claims

- More information
- Guaranteed access to care
- Better access to community services

Conclusion

The interviews revealed the challenges that mPLWH faced to access care and treatment, even though Canada's immigration service is often aware of their HIV status before their arrival. Solutions for mPLWH are available through community organizations or specialized clinics, but navigating them can be difficult. These experiences highlight the care journey of mPLWH and emphasize the importance of easy, free and universal access to HIV care.

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