

The Impact of Chemsex on the Health of the LGBTQIAPN+ Community: A Literature Review

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Abstract: *Chemsex is a recently widespread practice in the United Kingdom that aims to use psychoactive substances to facilitate sexual intercourse and inhibit taboos. This practice has been constantly spreading among Western countries and especially in the LGBTQIAPN+ community. Mainly because prejudice and structural segregation mechanisms make these individuals seek, in addition to physical pleasure, relief from social pressure and emotional trauma. However, this behavior establishes a strong relationship with chemical dependency as well as the contagion of sexually transmitted infections. This article seeks to disagree on chemsex, its preponderant factors and the appropriate treatment for this condition. This is a retrospective literature review that used articles from PubMed, Medline and SciELO as a database, as well as descriptors in Portuguese and English from 2017 to 2024. From this study, it was possible to observe that chemsex is associated with significant risks, including sexually transmitted infections (STIs), chemical dependency, overdoses, and psychiatric disorders, aggravated by structural factors, such as social marginalization and discrimination. In short, the analysis highlights the need for inclusive public health provisions adapted to the specificities of the LGBTQIAPN+ population.*

Keywords: chemsex, LGBTQIAPN+, mental health, STIs, marginalization, chemical dependency.

1. Introduction

Chemsex, or chemical sex, refers to the practice of sexual intercourse under the influence of psychoactive drugs, an emerging phenomenon in the United Kingdom and Western Europe mainly among individuals in the LGBTQIAPN+ community that has gained relevance in recent years. This practice, often associated with the prolongation and intensification of the sexual experience, involves the use of substances such as: GHB (gamma - hydroxybutyrate), GBL (gamma - butyrolactone), methamphetamine, mephedrone, MDMA (3, 4 - methylenedioxyamphetamine), cocaine, THC (tetrahydrocannabinol) and Poppers (Inhalable Nitrites), and is deeply intertwined with social and emotional issues, such as internalized homophobia, social stigma and low self - esteem. In this context, chemsex is promoted as a means of increasing sexual pleasure and overcoming taboos, however, it presents significant risks to the physical and mental health of those who practice it.^{1,2}

Recent studies indicate that chemsex is associated with serious health risks, such as drug addiction, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), overdose, and compromised mental health. The combination of psychoactive drugs and unprotected sex increases the risk of HIV transmission and other STIs, while the intoxicating effects of the substances reduce the perception of pain and increase physical vulnerability during sexual intercourse. In addition, the social marginalization faced by members of the LGBTQIAPN+ community can hinder access to health and support services, further aggravating the impact of this practice on their lives.^{3,4}

The debate surrounding chemsex becomes increasingly urgent given the growing impact of the use of psychoactive substances during sexual intercourse, especially in the context of the LGBTQIAPN+ population, which suffers greater social vulnerability associated with sociocultural stigmas. Furthermore, the promises of intensifying and prolonging the sexual experience through chemsex create

the idea of reducing bodily and sexual stigmas, favoring the dissemination and masking the dangers of this practice.^{5,6} In addition, misinformation contributes to its propagation, while the consequences of its use trigger chemical dependency by sensitizing serotonin receptors in the synaptic cleft of users and the psychic distortion of image by attributing the use of substances to better sexual performance as well as the deconstruction of taboos, making treatment an even greater challenge since the search for therapeutic support encounters as a difficulty the discrimination of gender and sexual orientation, in addition to the exclusion of certain social groups.^{3,6}

Furthermore, one can cite as an example the marginalization of transvestites and transsexuals as a relevant aspect in the analysis, since these individuals are stigmatized and segregated historically and socially based on a patriarchal view of society. Therefore, this population finds space in environments where the use of narcotics and psychoactive substances is part of the social context and cultural dynamics, favoring the practice of chemsex, which further aggravates the risks associated with the health of this population.^{7,8} Given this scenario, this article aims to discuss the importance of rethinking treatment strategies and combating misinformation about chemsex, especially with regard to the LGBTQIAPN+ population. Disseminating information and promoting empathy are essential social tools to address the problem, seeking not only to reduce the consumption of psychoactive substances, but also to combat the marginalization of vulnerable groups that face significant barriers in accessing adequate care.^{1,5} Thus, this study seeks to explore the multiple dimensions of the impact of chemsex on the health of the LGBTQIAPN+ population, addressing both the clinical and psychosocial consequences and the structural barriers faced by these individuals in seeking treatment and support. To this end, it is important to understand the factors that lead to the practice of chemsex and its implications for public health in order to develop effective intervention strategies and inclusive health policies.^{8,9}

2. Methodology

This study was prepared based on a retrospective literature review using the PubMed, Medline and SciELO databases. The descriptors used were “Chemsex”, “Chemical dependency”, “LGBTQI+ community” and their English equivalents “Chemsex”, “chemical dependency”, “LGBTQIAPN+ community”. In addition, the Boolean descriptor used was “AND” for the database search. The exclusion criteria were: articles that do not correlate with the theme of the impact of chemsex on the LGBTQI+ community, as well as articles published that do not cover the period studied from 2017 to 2024. A total of 42 articles were found, adding up all the databases. After reading the titles of the articles, it was observed that some of them did not meet the inclusion criteria for this study. Thus, it was possible to remove 07 duplicate articles and 35 articles were selected for reading the abstract. Of these, 20 studies were removed based on abstract analysis and did not meet the objective of elucidating the factors that contribute to chemsex as well as its impact on the health of the LGBTQI+ population, resulting in 15 full texts included in this literature review. The selection criteria were studies that had to meet the following criteria: studies published in English and Portuguese, systematic reviews, case reports, clinical studies and articles published between 2017 and 2024.

3. Results and Discussions

From this study, it was possible to identify that the use of psychoactive drugs is deeply rooted in the lives of many individuals in the LGBTQIAPN+ community, being a phenomenon that even precedes the emergence of HIV and AIDS.^{1, 10} Social marginalization, fueled by prejudice and discrimination, has historically placed this population in a position of vulnerability, increasing the likelihood of using narcotic substances as a way of seeking emotional comfort, stress relief and a sense of belonging. The low cost and wide availability of these drugs also contribute to their increasing use, especially in contexts of social and economic vulnerability.^{10, 11}

The results of this study indicate that social marginalization acts as an initial trigger, creating a cycle of exclusion and isolation that perpetuates the use of psychoactive substances. LGBTphobia and lack of acceptance, both internally and externally, are fundamental factors that suppress the healthy development of self - image and self - knowledge in many LGBTQIAPN+ individuals.^{4, 8} In response to this repression, many find psychoactive drugs as a form of “freedom” and temporary relief, which facilitates both social interaction and sexual experience. The use of these substances, in the context of chemsex, is often associated with feelings of increased pleasure and disinhibition, creating a powerful psychological connection between drug use and emotional and sexual well - being.^{12, 13}

However, continued use of psychoactive drugs to enhance sexual experience can evolve into problematic use patterns, such as substance abuse in prolonged chemsex sessions that can last for days and involve multiple sexual partners. This scenario is aggravated by the consumption of a combination of drugs with different effects, which can result in adverse

reactions, including severe intoxication and overdose episodes. Additionally, drugs used in chemsex, such as poppers, have anesthetic effects that reduce the perception of pain, increasing the risk of genital injuries that often go unnoticed, facilitating the transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), such as HIV.^{14, 15}

Another important aspect identified was the prevalence of cases of sexual violence and abuse during these prolonged chemsex sessions, where the capacity to consent can be compromised by the use of substances. The association between chemsex and risky sexual practices, including unprotected sex and multiple partners, increases the negative impact on the health of the LGBTQIAPN+ community, both physically and mentally.^{3, 4}

In addition, the study highlights the role of misinformation as one of the main factors that perpetuate the problem of chemsex. The lack of knowledge about the risks associated with the use of these substances and the lack of effective public policies aimed at this issue make the problem more difficult to address. The neglect of authorities and society in adequately addressing the chemsex crisis, largely because it is not a problem that directly affects the most privileged classes, reinforces the invisibility of this phenomenon.^{4, 12} If there were greater investment in education and awareness, both within the LGBTQIAPN+ community and in society in general, it would be possible to mitigate many of the harms caused by this practice. Thus, chemsex cannot be seen only as an isolated public health issue; it is a phenomenon deeply rooted in social inequalities and the marginalization of the LGBTQIAPN+ population. Interventions should include not only harm reduction and addiction treatment, but also broader actions to combat stigma and promote social inclusion.^{14, 15}

4. Conclusion

In summary, the dangers of chemsex are evident, since this practice is associated with a higher risk of STI transmission, overdoses and drug addiction, in addition to being intrinsically linked to the marginalization and social exclusion of transvestites, transsexuals and other LGBTQIAPN+ individuals. Furthermore, awareness should be raised through digital and media tools in partnership with health entities and community organizations, guiding individuals about the harmful effects of chemsex, in addition to in - depth studies on this practice in order to corroborate the development of public policies focused on disseminating information and creating multidisciplinary monitoring and psychological support programs for chemsex practitioners. Furthermore, it is necessary to establish support networks and social mechanisms that favor social inclusion and destigmatization of the LGBTQI+ population through mental health interventions and harm reduction strategies, together with awareness campaigns that discourage the use of psychoactive substances during sex.

Psychosocial support should be widely accessible, with a focus on the psychosocial issues faced by chemsex practitioners. In this context, initiatives need to prioritize the treatment of those who are already marginalized, while avoiding the spread of misinformation that promotes the use

of psychoactive substances as a form of sexual enhancement. Combating misinformation is essential, as this tool is one of the main contributors to prejudice and the perpetuation of the cycle of marginalization. In this way, it is possible to reduce the harm associated with chemsex and promote the health and well-being of the LGBTQIAPN+ community.

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