Author's response to reviews

Title: The Study of the Prevention of Anal Cancer (SPANC): design and methods of a three-year prospective cohort study

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Senior Editors Team
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Dear Editors,

This study protocol describes the main design and methodological aspects of SPANC and includes descriptive data on selected baseline characteristics for the first 350 participants. The study follows HIV-negative and HIV-positive homosexual men aged 35 years and older at five visits over three years, including a baseline visit and follow-up at 6, 12, 24 and 36 months. At each visit men undergo a digital ano-rectal exam, intra-anal swabbing for human papillomavirus (HPV) genotyping and anal cytology, followed by high resolution anoscopy, and biopsy of any abnormal lesions.

We believe this is a very important study. The incidence of HPV-associated anal cancer is increasing in homosexual men. Cytology-based screening for the anal cancer precursors, in a manner analogous to cervical cancer screening has been proposed. Uncertainty remains regarding anal HPV natural history and the role of anal cytology and high-resolution anoscopy as screening tests.

SPANC is one of only a few longitudinal cohort studies worldwide exploring the epidemiology of anal HPV infection among homosexual men. The study results will contribute substantially to our understanding of the natural history and will inform the possible development of guidelines for implementing anal cancer screening programs in this population.

Thank you for considering our manuscript for publication in BMC Public Health.

Yours sincerely,

Ms Dorothy Machalek