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Delaying HIV diagnosis and treatment may steal years and quality of life from those infected by virus

VANCOUVER, BC – Vancouver Coastal Health and Providence Health Care are not only showing why “it’s different now” to live with HIV, but also how *not* knowing you are living with it -- by delaying testing, diagnosis and treatment -- can unnecessarily shorten lifespans and increase complications.

The two health organizations cite a recent study from the British Medical Journal which confirmed that early diagnosis of HIV significantly contributes to longevity. According to the study, a person diagnosed as HIV-positive at age 20 who seeks treatment immediately can expect to live to the age of 73. However, an HIV-positive person who puts off diagnosis and treatment may have a shorter lifespan and quality of life as his or her immune system begins to fail.

“Being diagnosed earlier rather than later adds 15.5 years to your life. Conversely, a late diagnosis – on average – can strip away a similar amount of time. We are finding that life *could* have been much different now for those infected with HIV had they not delayed treatment. They would be living longer and more healthily,” said Dr. Réka Gustafson, medical health officer and director of communicable disease control in Vancouver.

Aside from reduced longevity, the consequences resulting from delayed treatment are many and varied, and relate to both the individual and the community at risk of transmission:

- Increased risk of opportunistic infections like severe pneumonias and meningitis;
- Increased risk of developing tuberculosis;
- Significant risk of transmitting the virus to others;
- Irreversible damage to the brain;
- HIV-related cancers (lymphoma, Castleman’s Disease, Karposi’s Sarcoma, etc.).

“We are still finding patients far too late into their disease process. For instance, several recent new diagnoses have identified patients who have very low immune levels which demonstrated that probably a decade has passed since the patient’s initial infection with HIV. We can usually reverse this decline with anti-retroviral treatment, but some patients are simply too sick and it is too late to reverse the damage to their immune system,” said Scott Harrison, Providence Health Care program director, urban health & HIV/AIDS.

The two health organizations are urging all adults to get tested. There are an estimated 3,500 people living in BC who are not aware they are HIV-positive. It is estimated that one in four HIV-positive people don't know they have it. Research shows that HIV-positive people who know about their diagnosis are 3.5 times less likely to transmit the

virus. Once they receive appropriate treatment, they are 96 per cent less likely to transmit the virus.

To read more about the British Medical Journal study, go to <http://www.bmj.com/content/343/bmj.d6016>.

HIV testing is available through your family doctor and at a number of sites. To find out where they are, go to www.itsdifferentnow.org.

For information specifically about rapid screening sites, go to: <http://vancouverstophiv.com/access-testing/>.

A social media marketing campaign, “It’s Different Now,” is underway and has featured bus shelter ads, urban posters, a dedicated website with videos, a Facebook page and Twitter presence to build awareness about how HIV transmission, testing and treatment has radically changed over the last five to 10 years.

VCH is responsible for the delivery of \$2.9 billion in community, hospital and residential care to more than one million people in communities including Richmond, Vancouver, the North Shore, Sunshine Coast, Sea to Sky corridor, Powell River, Bella Bella and Bella Coola.

Providence Health Care is one of Canada's largest faith-based health care organizations, operating 16 health care facilities in Greater Vancouver. PHC operates one of two adult academic health science centres in the province, performs cutting-edge research in more than 30 clinical specialties, and focuses its services on six "populations of emphasis": cardio-pulmonary risks and illnesses, HIV/AIDS, mental health, renal risks and illness, specialized needs in aging and urban health and is home to the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS.

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