

### HIV Testing Recommendations

Recent developments in HIV epidemiology, tests, and treatment have highlighted a need to shift HIV testing to become a routine part of primary care for the general population.

While the risk-based approach is an efficient means of diagnosing HIV in patients who recognize and disclose their risk factors to their physician, an estimated 25% of those with HIV remain unaware of their diagnosis. Those who are unaware of their infection are not benefiting from life-saving treatment and are **3.5 times as likely to transmit HIV to a partner**. Simply knowing one's diagnosis has been shown to change risk behaviour and reduce transmission.

Current testing practices do not uncover many of these unknown infections because risk based testing requires that patients **recognize** and **disclose** their HIV risks to their health care provider. Even those who do discuss their risks often do so after years of being at risk for HIV. Also, as the epidemiology of HIV changes, the risks we use to determine the need for testing also change. Finally, testing only when an HIV risk is discussed with your patients adds to the stigma of HIV testing that both the patient and the health care provider have to overcome.

By contrast, routine testing of pregnant women has been very successful, and has virtually eliminated mother to child transmission of HIV in this province. Therefore, to improve the diagnosis of HIV, we recommend that:

#### Health Care Providers in Vancouver Coastal Health routinely offer an HIV test to:

- **Anyone** who presents to acute or community care who has ever been sexually active and has not had an HIV test in the past year
- Anyone who is being **tested** for or diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection, hepatitis C, or tuberculosis.
- Individuals with a past history of a sexually transmitted infection

A practical way to add routine HIV testing to your practice is to **offer an HIV test with any blood work and every time you screen for sexually transmitted infections**. Patients are generally accepting of an HIV test if they know it is part of routine care, and know that they are not being singled out. These recommendations will also be promoted to the public over the coming months.

The yield in general practice of routine HIV testing is expected to be low. But, even if every physician in Vancouver Coastal Health diagnoses only one additional case of HIV in the next four years, our ability to diagnose HIV in our population will double. Over the next year, the effect of this strategy on the HIV epidemic will be evaluated in Vancouver through the STOP HIV AIDS project.

While many physicians are very experienced with HIV diagnosis and treatment, others may have seen few HIV cases in their practices. To support physicians in discussing a new HIV diagnosis with a patient or to link them to HIV care, please feel free to call VCH-Coastal Urban at 604-983-6700 and ask to speak to the Communicable Disease Nurse on Call.

We have also invited Dr. Reka Gustafson, Medical Director, VCH Communicable Disease Control to present at the **April 12 2011 Lions Gate Hospital Grand Rounds**. Dr Gustafson will present in more detail the rationale behind the revised HIV testing recommendations as well as answer any questions.

Sincerely,



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