

Editorial in Canadas leading medical journal calls for routine HIV testing

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The widespread availability of potent combination anti-HIV therapy (commonly called ART or HAART) has greatly decreased deaths from AIDS-related complications in Canada and other high-income countries. The benefits of ART are so profound that doctors estimate that a 20-year-old diagnosed with HIV today who takes his or her medicine exactly as prescribed and who does not have other pre-existing health issues will likely have a near-normal life expectancy.

Unfortunately, not all HIV-positive people in Canada are benefitting from ART in a timely manner. According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, researchers estimate that about 25% of 71,300 HIV-positive people alive in Canada today are not aware of their HIV status. Moreover, a large fraction of such people, because they are unaware of their HIV status, only receives care and treatment when their immune systems are very weak.

There are many disadvantages, at both a personal and societal level, to a late HIV diagnosis, including the following:

- because the immune system is weak, improvement in overall health may be delayed despite the use of ART
 - such people are prone to life-threatening infections
 - the cost of care is much greater
 - a person who does not know his or her status may not take steps to prevent further spread of HIV
- Canada

Routine HIV testing is recommended in Canada in cases of pregnancy and blood donations.

Otherwise, HIV testing is primarily done in people who are at or are perceived to be at high risk for this infection. In an editorial for an upcoming issue of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, Vancouver doctors Réka Gustafson and Julio Montaner note that risk-based testing is likely to miss “a substantial proportion of [hidden HIV infections].”

Uncovering HIV

Vancouver Coastal Health and Providence Health Care conducted a pilot project and found that 60% of HIV-positive people diagnosed late in the course of infection had previously encountered the health care system, as they had at least one of the following experiences three years prior to their diagnosis or since their last negative test:

- one lab test
- a visit to the emergency department of a hospital

- been admitted to a hospital for care

Drs. Gustafson and Montaner note that according to recommendations in other high-income countries, such as France and the U.K. and U.S., “these patients should have been offered an HIV test at these earlier encounters, without needing to raise or acknowledge a specific risk.” Moreover, public health authorities in these countries now encourage health care professionals to offer HIV testing to a broad age range of people, from teenagers to senior citizens, without taking into account risk factors.

The pilot study

As part of the Vancouver Coastal Health and Providence Health Care pilot project, hospital administrators recommend HIV testing “as part of all medical admissions and emergency department visits,” stated Gustafson and Montaner. Preliminary analysis of the pilot project found that 43% of hospital doctors offered the test and 92% of participants consented to be tested for HIV. This project uncovered six new cases of HIV infection per 1,000 tests. Other research has found that even one new case of HIV per 1,000 tests is cost effective. Based on the results from the pilot study, Dr. Gustafson, who is the Medical Health Officer for Vancouver Coastal Health, now recommends offering routine screening for HIV in hospitals and doctors’ offices.

Editorial in Canada’s medical journal

In an upcoming issue of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, based on the success of the BC pilot study, Drs. Gustafson and Montaner encourage other provinces and territories to “implement and evaluate routine HIV testing across Canada.” Hopefully such testing will be accompanied by supportive counselling both before and after testing.

This recommendation seeks to normalize HIV testing so that it is routinely done in hospitals and clinics so that undiagnosed cases of HIV can be caught early. Such normalization can help reduce costs, improve personal health and reduce the transmission of HIV.

--Sean R. Hosein

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