



BC-CfE Response to COVID-19

Senior scientific and program leads provide update on steps the BC-CfE is taking to address COVID-19

During these uncertain and unprecedented times, the senior leadership of the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) presented a webinar to inform and reassure its clients, staff, and stakeholders, their critical work, with only a few minor modifications, will continue during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Presented on March 25th, the webinar titled, "*COVID-19, the BC-CfE Response*", was organized and led by BC-CfE Director of Clinical Education and Training Dr. Silvia Guillemi. Touching on key areas of service delivery, the panel included: BC-CfE Executive Director and Physician-in-Chief Dr. Julio Montaner, Clinical Professor with UBC's Division of Infectious Diseases Dr. Peter Phillips, BC-CfE Laboratory Director, Dr. Zabrina Brumme, and BC-CfE Drug Treatment Program (DTP) Senior Manager Dr. Junine Toy.

Dr. Julio Montaner opened the webinar, giving a high-level overview of what clients, healthcare providers, and prescribers can expect to see change during this global health emergency. Despite limited data, he said international research on COVID-19 indicates there appears to be no increased risk of the disease for people living with HIV provided they are being effectively treated with, and adhering to, antiretroviral therapy and have a consistently undetectable viral load.

He did however stress the need for everybody, regardless of whether or not they're living with HIV, to adhere to all of the recommendations from health officials such as hand washing, social distancing, and staying at home as much as possible.

Dr. Peter Phillips followed by comparing and contrasting the current COVID-19 pandemic with other respiratory viral epidemics and pandemics. For those not closely following news of the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Phillips showed how the most recent similar pandemic that the world has been through, the so-called "Spanish flu" of 1918 compares to COVID-19. More accurately labelled an H1N1 virus, this pandemic infected about 500 million people, about a third of the world's population, and killed at least 50 million worldwide.

Thankfully, the death toll from COVID-19 is currently nowhere near that high. But Dr. Phillips was clear and unequivocal in saying our current pandemic has the potential to be that deadly if we don't heed the warnings of health experts. In fact, data presented by Dr. Phillips showed that COVID-19 could be even deadlier than the Spanish flu, due to having a higher fatality and infectivity rate, and the degree of interconnectedness of the world today compared to 1918.

It wasn't all a message of doom, Dr. Phillips said there are measures which can be taken by individuals, groups, and governments to stop the spread of COVID-19 including widespread adherence to the advice given by medical health officials to social distance.

Up next, Dr. Zabrina Brumme stressed the BC-CfE Laboratory's precision medicine testing remains operational, but asked healthcare providers to restrict the number of tests requested and warned some results will be delayed up to a week due to processing delays of samples in the system. The lab will temporarily reduce the availability of non-essential precision medicine

testing in order to ensure capacity for essential HIV testing urgently needed in clinical care. If non-essential testing is urgently required, the Lab will perform them but asks providers first contact the BC-CfE directly.

Dr. Junine Toy closed out the webinar assuring prescribers and clients the DTP and BC-CfE management have been proactively working to ensure an adequate supply of medication in the province. She provided an update on how the DTP is working with prescribers and clients to streamline the process from prescription to medication delivery.

The main goal of these changes is to ensure continuity of therapy while limiting time and exposure for those accessing medications and related healthcare appointments. This includes temporary adjustments to dispensing of longer supplies of medication and reduced non-essential routine viral load testing in virologically-suppressed clients on stable therapy.

Dr. Toy highlighted the desire for prescribers and clients to simplify medication prescription, preparation and pick-up. Wherever possible and if able, the DTP asks prescribers to direct prescriptions directly to the pharmacy in advance, clients to specify medication pick-up dates, and if sending a delegate (e.g. friend or family member), to provide their full name.

The full webinar can be reviewed at bit.ly/COVIDresponsewebinar, however as the situation and response to COVID-19 is constantly evolving, please refer to the BC-CfE website for the most up-to-date information: www.cfenet.ubc.ca.

» "We are grateful to the federal government for this emergency funding, which is enabling researchers at the BC-CfE, UBC and across Canada to help find solutions to this urgent crisis."

— BC-CfE Research Scientist, Dr. Jeffrey Joy, who received a CIHR grant to study the genetic evolution of COVID-19. To read more visit: bit.ly/COVIDgrant.



Colleagues bid a fond farewell to the heart and soul of the BC-CfE, Irene Day



Irene Day with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau

» "Oh, I love my job!"

Many times you hear this and might think it is said in jest, but if you ever spoke with BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) Senior Director of Internal and External Relations and Strategic Development Irene Day, you would know that (most times) she really meant it. The Cape Breton native has devoted the past 15 years to moving the BC-CfE's world leading research forward to every corner of the globe. She's had a powerful impact on local, national, and international healthcare leaders alike with her quick wit, intelligence and passion for equitable healthcare. Because of this, it came as a shock to many this past February when the BC-CfE announced the March 31st retirement of one of its most passionate and trailblazing leaders.



Irene and Dr. Julio Montaner in 2012

From the Pope and the Prime Minister of Canada, to clients living in the Downtown Eastside battling co-morbidities and homelessness, Irene treated everyone she encountered with kindness, respect and compassion. Her office door always remained ajar for anyone who wanted to talk, share a joke or enjoy a cup of tea from Irene's secret supply.

Speaking about her first time meeting Irene, the BC-CfE's Director of Education, Dr. Silvia Guillemi said, "We went on a trip to Prince George together for work. We got into a random taxi together once we arrived- she was extremely friendly to the taxi driver, and I thought to myself, why is she so incredibly friendly, as she asked the taxi driver about his life story. I spoke to my colleagues later, they laughed and they agreed, 'yes she is from Cape Breton. They are really friendly like that'."

Irene had many stand-out achievements throughout her decade and a half building up the BC-CfE. Colleagues agree that one of Irene's biggest legacies was her central role in advancing **Treatment as Prevention® (TasP®)** as an essential HIV care strategy for the province.



Irene meeting Pope Francis in March 2015

Dr. Bob Hogg, one of the BC-CfE's key principal investigators reminisced, "She attended every event where the Premier of BC would be in attendance to speak to him about **TasP®** and its life-saving impact, and the role of the BC-CfE. Julio then had the opportunity to speak to the Premier and at this point in 2013, it was then applied across the province. Since then, new HIV rates have never been lower, in part due to Irene's tenacious attitude and exceptional grasp of government relations."

Irene's devotion to advancing research and care for marginalized populations knew no bounds. Her colleagues refer to her as the 'embodiment' of the BC-CfE's mission. They would regularly observe her office lights were still turned on well into the early hours of the morning; midnight emails from Irene were not an uncommon occurrence. She moved the BC-CfE's agenda from a local community organization to one which has reached and impacted the work of national

health authorities across the globe- from China and Australia to Panama and France.

Beyond her leadership role in communicating the BC-CfE's work, Irene also led the charge in procuring cost effective HIV medications, including antiretroviral and pre-exposure prophylaxis, which are a core component of the BC-CfE's programs.

Irene's role also involved working closely with the BC-CfE's Executive Director and Physician-in-Chief Dr. Julio Montaner. He describes their dynamic as similar to the 'Batman and Robin' of the BC-CfE, in that she knew what he was thinking before he even spoke, "She has been a unique champion for the Centre in every possible aspect - whether it was engaging staff, her ambassadorial work with all levels of government and stakeholders or championing **Treatment as Prevention®**, or 90-90-90; for all of this, I am tremendously grateful.

"From the first day Irene arrived at the BC-CfE, she understood the significance of the work that we do. Over the last 15 years, together we have moved the BC-CfE from being locally focused to truly global, without forgetting our local roots. This is largely thanks to Irene's ability to drive our agenda, with great leadership and energy and in such a unique way. Irene will leave a huge vacuum here in the Centre. Her energy, her hard work, her mid-night and weekend calls, her political insights at every level, she developed such a complex role within the Centre across every possible dimension. It will take a lot of people, a lot of time, to fill this gap."

Not satisfied with her significant role in moving HIV care forward in BC, Irene's compassion and empathy went beyond the bounds of her role within the BC-CfE. In her spare time, she involved herself in a number of philanthropic programs for local and national NGOs and charities, including the Kidney Foundation, Heart & Stroke Foundation. She was also a founding member of the Canadian Cancer Society's Diamond Ball fundraising gala.

This selflessness and dedication to lifting others up is at the heart of all she does. "Many people do not think about the BC-CfE without thinking about Irene. She has brought her incredible loyalty, thoughtfulness and dedication to the BC-CfE, which will be her biggest legacy in my eyes," closed BC-CfE Research Scientist Dr. Kate Salters.

The staff and senior leadership at the BC-CfE and its partner organizations across the province would like to wish Irene the very best for her retirement where they hope she spends quality time with her husband Bob and her family. While we will work together to fill her fashionable heels, it will be near impossible to fill the part of the BC-CfE's heart and soul she leaves behind.

Dr. Bob Hogg recognized with 2019 Warren Gill Award from SFU



BC-CfE Senior Research Scientist Dr. Bob Hogg was recently named the recipient of the 2019 Warren Gill Award for Community Impact. A professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Simon Fraser University, Dr. Hogg is also deeply involved in much of the research in the BC-CfE Epidemiology and Population Health program.

Dr. Hogg was awarded the honour in recognition of his community-engaged teaching and research. This vital work includes collaborating with clinicians, community groups, and people living with HIV to reduce or eliminate barriers to treatment.

With an academically diverse background in anthropology, demography and epidemiology, Dr. Hogg brings a unique skillset in working with those living with HIV, First Nations communities, and other marginalized populations.

The BC-CfE congratulates Dr. Hogg on this well-deserved honour and we are incredibly grateful to work alongside him!

BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS

- > Improve the health of British Columbians with HIV through comprehensive research and treatment programs;
- > Develop cost-effective research and therapeutic protocols;
- > Provide educational support programs to health-care professionals;
- > Monitor the impact of HIV/AIDS on BC and conduct analyses of the effectiveness of HIV-related programs.

Physician Drug Hotline
1.800.665.7677

St. Paul's Hospital Pharmacy Hotline
1.888.511.6222

Website
www.cfenet.ubc.ca

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