

B.C. to reach out to most vulnerable HIV patients with new \$48-million program

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VANCOUVER -- The B.C. government announced today a \$48-million pilot project to find and treat sex trade workers and injection drug users who are either undiagnosed or untreated for HIV in Prince George and Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

The four-year program called Seek and Treat is the first of its kind in Canada and is believed to be the first internationally, the government says.

"Seek and Treat promises to decrease HIV and AIDS-related suffering and further prevent the spread of HIV," Health Services Minister Kevin Falcon said in a statement.

"British Columbia continues to be a recognized global leader in the fight against HIV/AIDS with this groundbreaking approach, thanks to the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS at St. Paul's Hospital under the leadership of Dr. Julio Montaner."

The pilot program aims to expand access to HIV/AIDS medications among hard-to-reach populations, including sex trade workers, injection drug users and men who have sex with men.

It is estimated that more than 12,000 people in B.C. are living with HIV, with about 27 per cent remaining undiagnosed.

The plan is to reach and engage more people living with HIV/AIDS in Highly Active Anti-retroviral Therapy (HAART), provide better care and treatment and significantly reduce or eliminate the virus' ability to spread.

HAART was pioneered in the early 1990s by Dr. Montaner, the director of the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, and introduced as the new standard of care by the Centre at the 1996 International AIDS Conference in Vancouver.

HAART is available free of charge to all HIV-infected B.C. residents through the BC Centre for Excellence. Since 2004, the number of people using HAART has doubled to more than 5,000.

"Seek and Treat expands the reach of HIV treatment and will result in decreased progression to AIDS among HIV-infected individuals and fewer new HIV infections among those at risk," Montaner said at a news conference today.

He credited Premier Gordon Campbell's commitment to HIV treatment, care and research, in order to reduce AIDS-related deaths and HIV infections in B.C.

"We will show the world how to do it," Montaner said.

It is believed the pilot will also open up the opportunity to respond to regional increases in AIDS infection and mortality.

It will target HIV care in the Downtown Eastside, the North and among Aboriginal populations as recommended in the provincial health officer's report, Pathways to Health and Healing.

Participation in the pilot will be strictly voluntary, using standard practices, including participants' informed consent.

The Merck drug company has committed \$1.5 million over three years to the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS to help evaluate the pilot program.

Operating and drug costs for the pilot are provided by the province, which estimated costs will be \$1.66 million in 2009-10, \$4.9 million in 2010-11, \$16.5 million in 2011-12 and \$16.5 million in 2012/13.

Drug costs are estimated at \$2 million in 2010-11, \$3.4 million in 2011-12 and \$3.4 million 2012-13.

For patients, HAART treatment prevents virus replication, slows disease progression, extends life expectancy and significantly reduces the number of new HIV-related diseases and AIDS-related deaths.

The BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS has provided groundbreaking new evidence showing treatment of people living with HIV in a jurisdiction can dramatically decrease the transmission rate of HIV.

Mathematical modelling suggests that this pilot project in these two regions could avert as many as 173 HIV infections in the first five years, which represents about \$65 million in avoided lifetime HIV treatment costs..

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