

Study highlights benefits of HAART treatment, culturally relevant programs for HIV-positive Aboriginal Canadians

New study results suggest HAART treatment coupled with appropriate social supports would improve health outcomes for HIV-positive Aboriginal people

Vancouver, British Columbia (July 20, 2010) – The results of a study presented this week at the XVIII International AIDS Conference in Vienna, Austria by the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) and its research partners reinforces the benefits of treating HIV-positive Aboriginal Canadians with highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) and enhancing supportive services to improve health outcomes.

Results from the study, *Clinical Response to Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy Among Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Individuals in British Columbia, Canada*, show that HIV-positive Aboriginal people receive the same benefits from HAART treatment as non-Aboriginal people.

“Ongoing research is proving time and again that HAART remains the gold standard for HIV treatment,” said Dr. Robert Hogg, Director of the BC-CfE’s Drug Treatment Program. “These results show that all Canadians with HIV can reap life-saving and life-enhancing benefits from HAART treatment and support further efforts to expand and improve the delivery of HAART treatment among Aboriginal populations.”

Researchers at the BC-CfE and Vancouver Native Health Society (VNHS) analyzed data from 400 HIV-positive individuals accessing HAART and found no association between Aboriginal ancestry and response to treatment. The study shows that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians who access HIV treatment are equally able to suppress the virus to undetectable levels.

Ken Clement, chief executive officer of the Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, said: “This study proves what we already know – response to treatment is not the problem. The issue is getting Aboriginal people to access treatment. There is a lot of distrust towards the medical community so there needs to be more culturally relevant HIV programs available throughout the province.”

Aboriginal persons in Canada are disproportionately represented in the HIV/AIDS epidemic, accounting for 27.3 per cent of positive tests in 2006 despite representing 3.8 per cent of the Canadian population. Previous population-based studies have shown that Aboriginal persons access HAART less frequently and have poorer treatment outcomes than non-Aboriginals.

A total of 400 participants (31.5 per cent Aboriginal) from the Longitudinal Investigation into Supportive and Ancillary health services (LISA) cohort of HIV-positive individuals 19 years or older accessing HAART in British Columbia met the criteria for inclusion in this study.

The BC-CfE played a key role in pioneering HAART, the landmark drug cocktail that has been adopted in Canada and around the world as the gold standard treatment for HIV.

For HIV-positive people with access to the medication, HAART has successfully turned HIV into a chronic but manageable condition. By dramatically decreasing the level of HIV in the blood and putting the disease in long-term remission, an HIV-infected individual who is on a regular regimen of HAART can expect to live decades of normal life.

Since 1996, HAART has been available free of charge to HIV-positive B.C. residents and has resulted in annual reduction of AIDS-related diseases and deaths by over 90 per cent. HAART is credited with saving nearly three million lives worldwide in the last 13 years.

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About the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS:

The BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) is Canada's largest HIV/AIDS research, treatment and education facility. The BC-CfE is based at St Paul's Hospital, Providence Health Care, a teaching hospital of the University of British Columbia. The BC-CfE is dedicated to improving the health of British Columbians with HIV through developing, monitoring and disseminating comprehensive research and treatment programs for HIV and related diseases.

About the LISA project:

The Longitudinal Investigation into Supportive and Ancillary Health Services (LISA) project is a three-year initiative of the BC-CfE funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR).

The objective of the LISA project is to better understand how people living with HIV and taking HAART are doing in terms of supportive services use, socio-demographic factors, and quality of life. Through face-to-face interviews, LISA gives people an opportunity to voice the successes and challenges they experience in their daily lives. To date, more than 1,000 individuals from across British Columbia have been interviewed, representing all health authorities.

About the Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network:

The Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network is the only national voice representing a coalition of hundreds of Aboriginal organizations and individuals. CAAN is committed to providing leadership, support and advocacy for all Aboriginal people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS, and to those most at risk to infection, regardless of where they reside.

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