

February 4, 2010

B.C.'s street-smart strategy to treat HIV - no matter who has it

By Wendy Stueck
From Friday's Globe and Mail

In ambitious pilot program, health workers will reach out to aboriginals, drug users and other hard-to-reach groups

A four-year, \$48-million pilot program will send health-care workers on to the streets in a bid to stop the spread of AIDS among aboriginal people, drug users and other groups among whom the condition tends to go undiagnosed and untreated.

The program, called Seek and Treat, aims to bring Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy, or HAART, to traditionally hard-to-reach groups such as prostitutes and injection-drug users, and will operate in Prince George and Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

"This effort is about outreach and support, over and above throwing pills to people," Julio Montaner, director of the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS and the prime mover behind the program, said yesterday.

HAART, pioneered by Dr. Montaner in the early 1990s, has turned what was once a death sentence into a relatively manageable health condition.

Researchers have also found that the therapy, a drug cocktail, actually reduces the spread of the virus by "sterilizing" the body fluids of those who are on it.

The province committed to an outreach concept last spring. Yesterday, B.C. Health Minister Kevin Falcon announced program funding, which includes \$1.5-million from pharmaceutical company Merck to help in evaluation.

The outreach program has the potential to avert as many

as 173 HIV infections over five years, representing about \$65-million in avoided HIV treatment costs, Mr. Falcon said.

B.C. artist Tiko Kerr attended the launch of the program. Mr. Kerr, supported by several other patients and Dr. Montaner, waged a high-profile battle with Canadian health regulators to obtain access to experimental HIV drugs.

Mr. Kerr, who has been HIV-positive for 25 years, said that since he began taking the new drugs in 2006, he feels "like I've been given my life back."

It's estimated that more than 12,000 people in B.C. are living with HIV, and of those, 27 per cent are undiagnosed. Between 350 and 440 new cases have been reported each year since 1999. Aboriginal people comprise an estimated 5 per cent of B.C.'s population, but account for up to 17 per cent of new HIV cases each year.

Some previous drug regimes involved multiple medications that had to be taken at different times of day, which was nearly impossible for people who were homeless or drug-addicted. But treatments have evolved to the point that some now feature a single dose to be taken at the same time each day - allowing, for example, someone who is in methadone treatment to receive HIV-AIDS medications at the same time.

CTVglobemedia Publishing, Inc

Reprinted from Globe and Mail, in the "British Columbia" section.



© CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.. All rights reserved. Licensed by British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS for 12 months on March 2, 2010 . You may forward this article or obtain additional permissions at the following iCopyright license record and renewal locator: <http://license.icopyright.net/3.8425-35758>. CTVglobemedia Publishing, Inc and Globe and Mail logos are registered trademarks of CTVglobemedia Publishing, Inc . The iCopyright logo is a registered trademark of iCopyright, Inc.