

U.S. funding cuts will lead to rise in HIV cases: expert

GORDON McINTYRE

Canadians can spend money now to stop the spread of HIV, or face a much larger bill down the road, according to a leading local expert.

The move by U.S. President Donald Trump to cut back international medical aid makes investing in

prevention even more vital, said Dr. Julio Montaner, executive director and physician-in-chief at the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS. Globally, the savings could be in the billions of dollars over time, he said.

"We did the same calculation for British Columbia, and the conclusion is the same: You spend a little

bit more now, but then the savings are tremendous, in this case even exponentially greater than anything we've ever seen."

Last week, Montaner — who also heads the HIV-AIDS program at St. Paul's Hospital and is the chair of AIDS research at UBC and St. Paul's Foundation — hosted HIV

experts from across Canada to warn about the rising incidence of HIV in the country, and the threats U.S. cuts to HIV programs pose.

Montaner arrived in Vancouver in 1981 to do pulmonary research at UBC, about the same time the HIV-AIDS epidemic began.

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Canada is losing ground in battle against HIV-AIDS, Montaner says

HIV RISING FROM **A1**

In those early days, patients were presenting primarily with a pneumococcal pneumonia, which is how Montaner got involved in HIV research.

"Patients would die from it, almost for sure," he said.

New drugs revolutionized the treatment for such patients to the point where "that became a non-issue," he said.

With those results, he was approached by federal officials to work with new trial drugs, and by 1996 he had discovered that a combination of antiretroviral drugs could keep the disease at bay.

"It became the cornerstone of highly active antiretroviral therapy," Montaner said. "It was a miracle.

"People became well almost immediately. The amount of virus in their blood went down to nothing, their immunity recovered."

Despite groundbreaking work by the Canadian Treatment as Prevention group, or TasP, and a program known as HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis, Canada is losing ground to HIV-AIDS, Montaner said.

Saskatchewan and Manitoba have HIV diagnoses of almost 20 people per 100,000, six times British Columbia's rate of 3.3 per 100,000, based on 2023 statistics. B.C. in the mid-1990s had a rate almost as high as those two Prairie provinces do today, for the worst infection rate in Canada back then.

But based on discussions with colleagues across Canada, Montaner said the situation continues to deteriorate, with an expectation that HIV numbers were significantly higher in 2024, and higher yet again in 2025, even though the year is only half over.

Globally, Montaner said, it is estimated that U.S. funding cuts will

lead to another 6.6 million new HIV infections and an additional 4.2 million AIDS-related deaths between 2025 and 2029.

That affects B.C., he said, because most new HIV cases in the province stem from interprovincial and international migration.

"HIV does not respect borders. We have seen an increase in the number of HIV cases in British Columbia, and more than two-thirds of those cases are cases that come into the province with HIV from other jurisdictions."

International rates of infant deaths and tuberculosis will be "a total disaster," he said. "I don't kid you when I say that this is a crime against humanity, because if you withdraw services for people whose life depends on it, only one outcome is possible, and that is suffering and death."

It's why he called last week's meeting, he said.

"There is a sense of apathy across the land that is actually totally unacceptable. ... The fact is, nobody cares about HIV-AIDS. Why? Because it affects marginalized, personal minorities, immigrants, the poor, the Downtown Eastside."

The United States provided half of the funding to fight HIV worldwide. Canada alone can't make up that shortfall, but should double its funding and encourage other donor countries to do the same, Montaner said.

"Because if we don't, we're going to end up paying for it with death, and not only death and disease in other countries. The instability it generates is going to create huge migratory problems for all of us, and we're already hearing it, because people are running away from the United States, coming to Canada, because they are either transgender or gay or minorities or HIV infected."

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