



Federal, Provincial and Territorial Ministers of Health Meet in Vancouver

Dr. Julio Montaner honoured to be invited to present on Treatment as Prevention®

Vancouver recently hosted the conference of the Provincial and Territorial Ministers of Health, joined by federal Health Minister Jane Philpott, who gathered to discuss key health priorities for Canadians.

After a decade of silence from the federal government regarding endorsement of Treatment as Prevention (TasP®) as a national strategy and other evidence-based strategies to combat HIV, Dr. Julio Montaner, BC-CfE Director, was honoured to have been invited to present to the Ministers of Health during the conference. The presentation was entitled "Treatment as Prevention: From Research Hypothesis to Global Policy and Beyond." Dr. Montaner demonstrated how the TasP® strategy has prevented morbidity, premature mortality, and HIV transmission while proving to be cost-saving. This strategy has opened the door to a new concept of targeted disease elimination based on the selective use of TasP® to markedly reduce the burden of specific infectious diseases (e.g. viral hepatitis, tuberculosis, addictions, etc.) with the aim of enhancing healthcare sustainability.

In stark contrast to its predecessor, the new Liberal government publicly endorsed adoption of the global plan to end AIDS. Even before the federal elections took place, the Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada, Justin Trudeau, announced his support in a letter to Dr. Montaner dated October 8, 2015, for the adoption

of the global plan to end AIDS, and called on Canada to make a commitment on the world stage. Following the federal elections, Minister Philpott echoed this sentiment in a World AIDS Day statement where she said, "Canada endorses the United Nations Joint Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS) global HIV treatment targets - known as the 90-90-90 Target. This global target calls for 90% of people living with HIV to know their status, 90% of all those people diagnosed with HIV to be on treatment, and 90% of people on treatment to successfully manage their infection by 2020. Achieving these goals will help get the world on track to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030."

In another sign Justin Trudeau's Liberals have a very different approach to illicit drugs than the previous government, prior to the commencement of the conference, Minister Philpott toured Insite, Vancouver's downtown east side supervised-injection site. She called her visit "extremely moving" and gave a heartfelt stamp of approval.

Broad agreements on key topics

Although a new health accord was not adopted during the conference, the Federal, Provincial and Territorial Ministers of Health did make an announcement on some broad agreements on key topics which included: shared health priorities, funding commitments, care in the community, health innovation, next steps, indigenous health, physician assisted dying,

prescription drug abuse, and health promotion and prevention. In an excerpt from the statement, the Ministers of Health wrote:

"We agreed that strong, universally accessible, publicly financed health-care systems are an essential foundation for a strong and prosperous Canada. We affirmed our commitment to continue transforming and strengthening health-care systems so that they can provide high-quality, accessible and patient-centered health services in a sustainable way. To this end, we, as Federal, Provincial and Territorial Ministers, agreed to work individually and collectively on the following immediate priorities where efforts will yield the greatest impact:

- Enhancing the affordability, accessibility and appropriate use of prescription drugs;
- Improving care in the community, home care and mental health, to better meet the needs of patients closer to home and outside of institutional settings; and
- Fostering innovation in health-care services to spread and scale proven and promising approaches that improve the quality of care and value-for-money."

Read the statement at bit.ly/MinistersOfHealth2015.



» Canada has provided global leadership in the fight against HIV/AIDS, including the ground-breaking work of Dr. Julio Montaner and the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, and countless others.

— Jane Philpott, Federal Health Minister. Excerpt from 2015 World AIDS Day statement.

Read more at bit.ly/WAD2015Statement



Dr. Keith Ahamad – Clinician Scientist, BC-CfE



» Dr. Keith Ahamad took a leap of faith when, after seven years working as a computer engineer, he listened to his heart's calling, quit a promising career, and started the long journey towards becoming a physician. Although no one in his family had practiced medicine, he knew he wanted to make a difference in the lives of the most vulnerable.

In what he calls a "12-year epic undertaking" that began in 2002, the road to medical school was no small feat. He first had to complete a three-year science degree before being accepted into the University of British Columbia's Faculty of Medicine, and despite all of the challenges along the way, the married father of two young sons couldn't be happier. Today, he works as an addictions physician at St. Paul's Hospital and, under the direction of Dr. Evan Wood at the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS. He has focused his work and research on addiction medicine, attending to patients struggling with a range of drug addictions and other health challenges.

One could say the seeds of change were planted in 1999 when Dr. Ahamad accepted a four-month work transfer to Vancouver from his native Ottawa. It was during this time he first came across Vancouver's unique downtown eastside (DTES). He said, "I remember thinking, 'What on earth is this?' I was curious about it because addiction was something I really didn't understand." Although he transferred shortly afterward to Europe for work, his experience of the DTES never left him.

STUDY

Daily cannabis use may lower HIV viral loads

» Daily cannabis use may lower HIV viral loads, suggest remarkable findings from a relatively new field of research. The BC-CfE study is believed to be the first to describe a possible beneficial effect for cannabinoids – such as marijuana – on HIV disease progression among humans.

High levels of cannabis use are reported by some HIV-positive people in attempts to ease the side effects of triple-drug therapy regimens, as well as recreationally. However, the scientific evidence base for cannabinoids is limited, and their effect on HIV disease parameters such as HIV viral load (the amount of virus in a person's blood) is largely unknown.

Between May 1996 and March 2012, 149 individuals who were HIV-negative at their baseline study interview later tested positive for HIV infection. Of these, 88 (62%) individuals completed at least one interview and viral load observation within the year following the estimated date of HIV infection.

Among the 88 individuals, researchers observed significantly lower viral loads that were independently associated with people reporting at least daily cannabis use in the first year following HIV infection. The results support further investigation of the possible virological and immunological effects of cannabinoid exposure among HIV-infected people.

The current findings should be evaluated in light of a growing body of evidence generated from pre-clinical settings on the structure and function of the endocannabinoid receptor system and its possible role in HIV disease. Cannabinoids, including

During his time in Europe, he was deeply moved by the work of a friend who worked as an infectious disease specialist with the World Health Organization. "I was in my late twenties, approaching thirty, and re-evaluating where my career was going. I was really intrigued by her experience with patients and her knowledge of the human body. Although I loved engineering, I wanted those human experiences," he explained.

Soon after his return from Europe, he worked in Vancouver once again and accepted an offer to volunteer at a needle exchange program offered through the Three Bridges Community Health Centre. During his time there, he had the good fortune of meeting Dr. Peter Granger, a family doctor whom he calls his "professional hero" and who was pivotal in Dr. Ahamad's decision to quit his job and pursue his dream of becoming a doctor. He shared, "Dr. Granger was a really amazing guy who inspired and guided me towards an important change in my career. He was a strong, quiet leader and someone who inspired so many people. He was instrumental in sitting on the board of the Dr. Peter Centre, creating Three Bridges Community Health Centre and someone who was hugely engaged with the community, encouraging multi-disciplinary health care teams as opposed to working in silos."

Changing careers is something many professionals often dream of doing. Dr. Keith Ahamad is living proof that, with enough stamina and perseverance, dreams do come true.



Dr. M-J Milloy, lead author

tetrahydrocannabinol (THC – the chemical responsible for most of marijuana's psychological effects), bind to receptors expressed by cells in the nervous and immune systems and have been shown to have beneficial immune-suppressive and anti-inflammatory properties.

One experiment showed a synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonist suppressed replication of HIV in microglia, the major cell type productively infected in the human nervous system.

Researchers noted one similar study conducted on primates. Although great caution should be exercised when inferring similarities between data generated in primates and human participants, the observed association is consistent with the findings of a study involving chronic exposure to THC among rhesus macaques infected with HIV. In that study, monkeys exposed to THC showed lower viral loads, greater retention of body mass, reduced inflammation and lengthened survival compared with those exposed to placebo.

The BC-CfE study "High-intensity cannabis use associated with lower plasma human immunodeficiency virus-1 RNA viral load among recently infected people who use injection drugs" was published in Drug and Alcohol Review.

Dr. Milloy's independent research into HIV and cannabis is supported by a \$1-million gift to the University of British Columbia Faculty of Medicine by National Green Biomed Ltd.



Minister Jane Philpott presenting Dr. Montaner with his award

BC-CfE Director, Dr. Montaner, Awarded Prestigious CIHR Barer-Flood Prize

Dr. Julio Montaner was honoured during the Health Minister's conference with the Canadian Institute of Health Research 2015 Barer-Flood Prize in Health Services and Policy Research. The award was in recognition of the incredible contributions he has made over his career across multiple health pillars by revolutionizing HIV treatment and championing public health policies and access-to-care. The award's review committee received nominations for many outstanding professionals and researchers from across the country.

LECTURES & EVENTS

What's New in Addiction Medicine? Vol. 26

Psychedelic Assisted Psychotherapy as a Treatment Modality for Addiction and Other Mental Health

Speaker: Dr. Nitasha Puri

Tuesday, February 23, 2016, 12–1PM

Hurlburt Auditorium (2nd floor), St. Paul's Hospital

Forefront Lecture Series

Preventing Overdose Deaths due to Fentanyl in the Drug Supply

Speaker: Dr. Mark Lysyshyn

Wednesday, February 17, 2016, 12–1PM

Cullen Family Theatre, Providence Level 1, St. Paul's Hospital

HIV Care Rounds

Peer Navigation Program at the IDC

Speaker: Glen Bradford & Mary Petty

Thursday, February 25, 2016, 8–9AM

Conference Room 7, Providence Level 1, St. Paul's Hospital

For more information, contact us at Education@cfenet.ubc.ca or visit our website at www.education.cfenet.ubc.ca

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 B.C. 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
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