



BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS' researchers, Dr. Julio Montaner (right) and Dr. Robert Hogg, emphasized the need to implement Treatment as Prevention nationally in the face of overwhelming evidence that highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) saves lives and prevents new HIV infections.

Landmark study reinforces benefits of antiretroviral treatment

BC-CfE researchers call for national implementation of made-in-Canada Treatment as Prevention strategy to save lives and curb the spread of HIV

Study results show B.C. is the only province with a significant decrease in new HIV diagnoses and has averted more cases of HIV than Ontario and Quebec combined, in part due to expansion of free antiretroviral treatment.

A new study from the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) showed that highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) reduces new HIV diagnoses, deaths and HIV prevalence, suggesting that the made-in-Canada Treatment as Prevention strategy should be implemented across the country.

The study, published in the peer-reviewed journal *PLOS ONE*, investigated patterns of new HIV diagnoses, HIV-related mortality and HAART use in Canada from 1995 to 2008.

Analysis showed that for each 10 per cent increment in HAART coverage, the rate of new HIV diagnoses decreased by eight per cent in B.C., Ontario and Quebec — the three provinces with the largest epidemics.

In British Columbia, the B.C.-pioneered Treatment as Prevention strategy has led to the widespread expansion of HAART coverage. The total number of new HIV diagnoses in the province dropped during the period of the study from 682 in 1995 to 348 in

2008, and the decline continues, with 289 new HIV diagnoses in 2011 despite an increasing number of tests being done.

"The dramatic and sustained decrease in AIDS-related morbidity and mortality and new HIV infections in British Columbia reinforces Treatment as Prevention as a highly effective approach in the fight against HIV/AIDS," said Dr. Julio Montaner, senior author of the study and director of the BC-CfE.

"The evidence is clear: the time is now for Canada's leaders to take action and implement Treatment as Prevention as the national strategy in the fight against HIV/AIDS. To do anything less would be a failure in their duty to protect the health of all Canadians."

The study found that B.C. has also averted more cases of HIV than Ontario and Quebec combined, in part because B.C. is the only province to offer completely free HAART to virtually all HIV-infected individuals. Findings showed that in 2008, the province averted 10.33 cases of HIV per 100,000 population compared to 3.40 and 0.33 averted cases for Ontario and Quebec respectively. In other provinces, HAART coverage is more limited

and the number of new HIV diagnoses per year has remained relatively unchanged, even increasing in some jurisdictions.

For instance, the Prairies showed a four-fold increase in rates of new diagnoses over the course of the study period, driven by new infections in Saskatchewan, where each year on average, 200 people are newly diagnosed with HIV infection.

"This study provides compelling evidence that expanded HAART coverage can markedly curb the impact of HIV," said Dr. Robert Hogg, lead author of the study and director of the Epidemiology and Population Health Program at the BC-CfE. "Immediate access to free HAART should be considered a clinical imperative and a human rights priority."

Every year, 3,300 men and women in Canada are diagnosed with HIV infection and it is estimated that 65,000 Canadians are now living with HIV. Study findings show that this number could double within the next 15 years if the current rate of new infections continues and treatment is not expanded across Canada.



» This comprehensive study provides us with clear evidence that expanding Treatment as Prevention is the best way forward to fight HIV/AIDS. We should take the lessons learned in British Columbia and apply them in other jurisdictions to maximize our ability to decrease morbidity, mortality and new HIV infections."

— Dr. Perry Kendall, provincial health officer for B.C., comments on the findings of the *PLOS ONE* study

» See full story above



Increasing majority of British Columbians support regulating adult cannabis use

A recent Angus Reid poll released by Stop the Violence BC (STVBC) showed that British Columbians overwhelmingly favour moving away from cannabis prohibition toward a system of regulation and taxation, and that lawmakers continue to lag far behind public opinion on revamping cannabis laws in B.C.

The survey, conducted between October 22 and 24, 2012, found that 75 per cent of B.C. respondents support the taxation and regulation of cannabis over chasing and arresting cannabis producers and sellers, a jump of six percentage points from just one year ago.

"These results reveal a quite remarkable and growing dissatisfaction among British Columbians with the status quo and an eagerness for policymakers to pursue an entirely new approach to cannabis policy," said Mario Canseco, vice president, Angus Reid Public Opinion. "These beliefs cut across political, social and regional lines. I can't think of any other issue where the laws on the books are inconsistent with the wishes of three-quarters of British Columbians."

The poll results come a year after a similar Angus Reid survey, and demonstrate increasing public opinion that cannabis prohibition in B.C. has been ineffective and has caused significant social harms and public safety issues, such as increased organized crime, gang violence and illegal marijuana grow ops.

"From a scientific and public safety perspective, making cannabis illegal has clearly been an expensive and harmful failure," said Dr. Evan Wood, founder of STVBC and Canada Research Chair in Inner City Medicine at the University of British Columbia (UBC). "With 75 per cent of British Columbians supporting change, and the status quo contributing to increasing harms in B.C. communities, it is absolutely time for politicians to catch up with the public."

A STVBC report marking the achievements during the year since the coalition's launch, entitled *BC Cannabis Policy: The time for leadership is now*, was released in tandem with the polling results. The report highlights the discordance between government policy in B.C. and the recommendations of leading British Columbian experts and the wishes of the public. It urges provincial politicians

to demonstrate their leadership by telling British Columbians that they support researching a new approach involving a pilot study of the strict regulation and taxation of adult cannabis use under a public health framework.

The Public Health Association of BC (PHABC) is the latest prominent expert body to endorse the STVBC campaign. PHABC is a voluntary, non-profit, non-government organization comprising B.C.'s public health leaders whose mission is to preserve and promote the public's health.

In addition, Kash Heed, a long-time law enforcement official and MLA for Vancouver-Fraserview, recently released a video and written statement in support of STVBC. "In the early 1990s, I began to fully recognize the futility and the social, economic and public health costs of continuing marijuana prohibition, and I came to one inescapable conclusion—cannabis prohibition fuels gang violence in B.C. In fact, costly law enforcement efforts have only served to drive the marijuana industry deeper into the hands of violent organized crime groups," wrote Heed in the statement.

Since launching a year ago, STVBC has received many high-profile endorsements from across the law enforcement, public health and political sectors, including the Health Officers Council of BC, four former mayors of Vancouver and four former B.C. attorneys general. The PHABC endorsement follows noteworthy support from eight current B.C. mayors and the passing in September of a Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM) resolution to decriminalize cannabis.



Kash Heed, MLA for Vancouver-Fraserview, recently released a video and written statement in support of Stop the Violence BC coalition.

Key Angus Reid poll data:

- Only 14 per cent of British Columbians believe possession of a marijuana cigarette should lead to a criminal record, down from 20 per cent one year ago.
- 75 per cent support the taxation and regulation of cannabis over chasing and arresting cannabis producers and sellers, an increase of six percentage points from 2011.
- 74 per cent would be comfortable living in a society where adult cannabis consumption was taxed and legally regulated under a public health framework, an increase of four percentage points from last year.
- 62 per cent, fewer B.C. residents support decriminalizing marijuana use than the proportion that supports outright taxation and regulation.

WHO calls on Western Pacific Region to invest in HIV strategies

The World Health Organization (WHO) is calling on member states in the Western Pacific region to honour commitments made at a United Nations General Assembly High-Level Meeting in 2011. During this meeting, bold HIV targets were set to be realized by 2015, but the resources needed to meet these targets have yet to materialize.

According to WHO, more than 90 percent of people living with HIV in the region are from Cambodia, China, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea and Vietnam. The Philippines is among the few countries globally where incidence of HIV is rising.

Quoted in China's Xinhua News Agency, Shin Young-soo, WHO's regional director for the Western Pacific, addressed the 63rd meeting of WHO Regional Committee for the Western Pacific in Hanoi. He praised some Western Pacific countries for pioneering the development of national HIV strategies, improving access to HIV testing and counselling, and increasing antiretroviral coverage. However, he warned that the gains of recent years will be eroded by dwindling resources, leaving a majority of these countries relying mostly on external funding for HIV prevention and care.



"HIV will remain endemic in key populations for many decades, with increasing public health and economic costs. Countries must now make strategic investments in HIV to halt new infections," said Shin. "Renewed strategic and programmatic approaches to increase political leadership, country ownership and community involvement, and to expand prevention and antiretroviral therapy, are needed."

In 2010, an estimated 1.3 million adults and children were living with HIV in the Western Pacific Region.

Researchers investigate factors associated with difficulty accessing crack cocaine pipes

Researchers at the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) recently conducted a study to investigate the factors that limit crack cocaine pipe access among people who use drugs in settings where pipes are provided at no cost, but in a limited quantity. Difficulty accessing crack pipes has been found to predict pipe sharing, and pipe sharing is associated with various health-related harms, including hepatitis C transmission.

The study was conducted among 914 participants in Vancouver who reported using crack cocaine. Of those surveyed, a substantial proportion (33 per cent) reported difficulty accessing crack pipes. The most common reasons given for difficulty accessing pipes were sources being closed and no one around selling pipes. Factors that were found to be independently associated with difficulty accessing crack pipes included involvement in sex work, having shared a crack pipe, police presence where one buys or uses drugs, difficulty accessing services and health problems associated with crack use.

The study concluded that there is an urgent need to enhance efforts to distribute crack pipes and address the barriers to pipe access. Results were published in the *Drug and Alcohol Review*.

Researchers examine police confrontations with street youth and associated health-related harms

While street-level policing has been recognized as a driver of health-related harms among people who inject drugs, little is known about the extent of interaction between police and street-involved youth and associated health-related harms. Researchers at the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) recently examined the incidence and risk factors for police confrontations among street-involved youth in Vancouver.

Between 2005 and 2011, data derived from 991 participants enrolled in the At-Risk Youth Study (ARYS) showed that a significant proportion (44.4 per cent) of participants reported being stopped, searched or detained by police. Factors associated with police confrontations included male gender, homelessness, recent incarceration, drug use, sex work involvement and drug dealing. In addition, 16.9 per cent of participants reported experiencing violence at the hands of police.

The study concluded that various factors, such as homelessness, increased the likelihood of being confronted by police, and police confrontations were associated with markers of health-related harm among street youth. The findings highlight the need for social and structural interventions that best enable police to preserve public safety and order without negatively influencing health behaviours of street youth. Study findings were published in the *International Journal of Drug Policy*.

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.

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