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Summer 2013

# HIV Update

*An update for those living with HIV/AIDS and their care providers  
from Preventive Public Health at Northern Health*

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*Public Health  
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## Northern Health builds system to support people living with HIV and hepatitis C

On the heels of the BC government's decision to expand the STOP HIV/AIDS program into all BC health authorities, Northern Health is building a robust system of services designed to support people living with HIV and hepatitis C.

The experiences of the four-year STOP HIV/AIDS pilot project in Prince George – which ran from 2010 to 2013 – enabled Northern Health to build a valuable foundation for its regionally focused Blood Borne Pathogens (BBP) program.

“We’re planning to build system capacity for HIV and hepatitis C-related services across the north and we’re getting help from our northern communities,” said Kathy

MacDonald, Northern Health's Regional Director, Preventive Public Health.

“We’ll establish a core staff team with regional responsibilities, and we’ll also inaugurate a regional advisory committee. Another priority will be to map the needs, resources and interests of our regional communities. We want to take a thoughtful, planned and strategic approach to designing our regional services.”

Dr. Susan MacDonald, Northern Health's Chief Medical Officer, who was also the Medical Lead on the STOP HIV/AIDS project, said another pivotal step for the BBP program will be to implement widespread HIV testing at Northern Health facilities.

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# More persons living with HIV now on treatment

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“Our next push is to initiate routine HIV testing to all people who are admitted to acute care facilities, beginning with UHNBC,” said Dr. MacDonald. “We’ve held several education events for clinical staff on the need for routine HIV testing.”

“We’ve had good success over the last few years. HIV testing was slow to increase but we’re seeing momentum now. We’ve also seen increased continuity of care and a significantly increased number of people with HIV who are now on treatment and maintaining very low viral counts.”

Added Dr. MacDonald: “We’ve reached a turning point in our STOP HIV/AIDS project and are encouraged that the aims and objectives developed in the pilot project are becoming a reality in our Northern Health regions.”

The BBP program goals for 2013:

- Reduce the number of new HIV infections in BC;
- Improve the quality, effectiveness, and reach of HIV prevention services;
- Diagnose those living with HIV as early as possible in the course of their infection;
- Improve quality and reach of HIV support services for those living with and vulnerable to HIV; and
- Reduce the burden of advanced HIV infection on the health system.

The BBP program results in 2013:

- HIV tests increased by over 1,800 in 2012;
- 88% of the 233 HIV-positive patients being treated



*Dr. Abu Hamour (left), Infectious Diseases Specialist, discusses the merits of HIV testing at a one-day workshop on Routine HIV Testing in Acute Care in Prince George on March 28, 2013.*

by Dr. Abu Hamour, Infectious Diseases Specialist in northern BC, are on HIV medications;

- 92% of the 28 HIV-positive clients at the Prince George Regional Correctional Centre are on HIV medications;
- Among the HIV-positive patients cared for at Central Interior Native Health Society, there is a 44% increase of those on HIV medications; and
- The I-track study (national survey of intravenous drug users) in Prince George has revealed that among the HIV-positive people who use intravenous drugs, the percentage of those being treated with HIV medications increased from 10.5% in 2008 to more than 68% in 2012. •

## Northern Health wins major award at 7th annual Excellence in BC Health Care Awards

Northern Health’s STOP HIV/AIDS Pilot Project was named the winner of the Gold Apple award in the Collaborative Solutions category at the seventh annual Excellence in BC Health Care Awards on June 24, 2013, in Vancouver.

The awards, presented by the Health Employers Association of BC (HEABC), recognize outstanding health care employees and salute innovation and best practices among BC’s publicly-funded health care providers.

Northern Health was recognized for conducting an ambitious, multi-media education and awareness campaign in collaboration with numerous community partners. Using traditional and online advertising, as well as community outreach, the campaign featured persons living with HIV, health care providers, HIV educators and other HIV champions spreading a key message: that everyone should be encouraged to take an HIV test.

STOP – Seek and Treat for Optimal Prevention – was a four-year, provincially-funded initiative, running from 2010 to 2013 in Prince George and Vancouver’s Downtown



*Michael Marchbank, HEABC President & CEO (far left) and Betsy Gibbons, HEABC Board Chair (far right) present Gold Apple award to Northern Health’s Dr. Susan MacDonald (centre left) and Kathy MacDonald (centre right), Regional Director, Preventive Public Health, in Vancouver on June 24, 2013.*

Eastside. The success of the pilot project prompted the BC government to expand the STOP project to all of BC’s health authorities. •

## Central Interior Native Health Society helps clients lead healthier lives

The Central Interior Native Health Society (CINHS) continues to report major successes in team-based integrated primary health care and in HIV testing and treatment numbers.

CINHS tested 215 clients between June 2012-June 2013, an increase from the 152 tests conducted from 2011-2012. Sam Milligan, CINHS HIV nurse said, “The simple reason why CINHS testing numbers have increased is that we made evidence-informed decisions to increase screening of blood-borne pathogens.” Milligan said the increase is expected to continue in the short term but will level off long term, since their highest testing rates are on new clients, with the data used as a screening tool to establish a baseline.

“We then test based on risk factors,” he said. “So if you factor in that everybody is offered testing as routine once, and then on risk factors, the inevitable is a ceiling on the number of tests needed.”

The CINHS Medication Adherence Support Program (MASP) is now core-funded which means that the program’s goal – to keep clients on HIV medications and live healthier lives despite an HIV diagnosis – can be maintained. Milligan said secured funding ensures “the continued growth of HIV programming to support a wider and more at-risk clientele in their journey with HIV.” From June 2012 to June 2013, 27 CINHS clients started, re-started or switched their antiretroviral (ARV) regimens, compared to 15 clients in 2011-2012.

Milligan said that regular visits, ongoing education and relationship-building at MASP help clients not only adhere to their HIV treatment, but also deal with issues such as homelessness, alcoholism, or other addictive behaviours. Thanks to MASP, many clients who may not have pursued HIV treatment are now engaging with their care and experiencing “falling HIV viral loads,” he said.

As a further testament to the program’s success, CINHS clinicians at MASP have been selected to present at the CATIE National Forum: New Science, New Directions in HIV and HCV conference, which is scheduled for September 2013 in Toronto. •



*Sam Milligan, HIV nurse, conducts an HIV test.*

## Northern BC First Nations HIV/AIDS Coalition conducts community outreach

Educators with the Northern BC First Nations HIV/AIDS Coalition have spent much of the last six months travelling to northern BC communities to raise awareness about HIV, health and sexuality, addictions and other risks.

With the assistance of a Northern Health grant, the coalition has sent HIV educators Julius Okpodi and Bonnie Cahoose to various locations to educate youth and elders on safe and healthy life choices. Among the First Nations communities they have visited are Hartley Bay, Lax Kw’alaams, Kitkatla in the northwest, and Halfway, Blueberry and Doig in the northeast. They also staged a successful “Train the Trainers” session for youths in Terrace with participants from Daylu Dena Council and the Gitksan and Tsimshian communities.

According to Colette Plasway, coalition program coordinator, the HIV training/educational sessions and HIV information booths have provided “many ‘aha’ moments” to participants. She said the training sessions for first responders were “an eye-opener. There have been community incidents where the first responders were still unaware that they could touch someone who has HIV and not become infected.” She added that being aware of the misunderstandings surrounding HIV enables the coalition’s educators to tailor their sessions and address knowledge gaps.

In other news, Plasway noted that the coalition has been acknowledged by the Ministry of Health as a best practice model in BC for working in collaboration with federal and provincial agencies, First Nations communities and people living with HIV.

“We’ve also been successful obtaining funding to start an elders coalition working group to participate in our First Nations coalition quarterly meetings and sub-meetings,” she added. •



*Educator Julius Okpodi (front) with participants at youth training session in Terrace in February 2013.*

# Positive Living North spreads HIV information and builds relationships



Stacey Hewlett (left), PLN HIV/AIDS Educator, and Shannon Froelich (right), Member Services Manager, march in the Prince George Pride Parade on July 6, 2013.

Acquisition and administration of IMAGINE Grants across all departments has been the key to great growth and successes for Positive Living North over the last six months.

Executive Director Vanessa West said that Northern Health grants have made possible “the revamping of the PLN website, to provide prevention messaging along with information about our programs and services.” West said PLN is pleased they are now able to link to Northern Health’s [HIV101.ca](http://HIV101.ca) video from its own website.

Samantha McRae has been hired as the new Outreach HIV/AIDS Educator for the northeast region. Based at the Nawican Friendship Centre in Dawson Creek, West said McRae’s primary focus “will be to provide awareness around HIV transmission and prevention to the Dawson Creek, Fort St. John, Chetwynd, Fort Nelson, and outlying rural and First Nation communities.” Northern Health’s positive response to PLN’s appeal for resources has allowed the organization to develop a presence in the northeast as a distributor of important epidemiological information. McRae will “be a welcomed addition to PLN in an area that has been underserved to date,” said West.

The upcoming Scotiabank AIDS Walk for Life – scheduled for September 14, 2013, at Masich Place Stadium – is a perfect venue to continue to put “a face and heart to HIV, rather than just facts,” said Sandra Sasaki, PLN’s Education Manager. The opening ceremonies will feature Frontline Warriors sharing their stories to raise awareness, and reduce the stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV/AIDS.

Sasaki added that Dr. Abu Hamour, Infectious Diseases Specialist, has been named the 2013 AIDS Walk Champion for his “positive role in providing high-quality HIV care, treatment, and support.” Sasaki noted that Dr. Hamour’s influence has “unquestionably made a life-altering difference for people living with HIV/AIDS/HCV.” She said that PLN is seeing an increased amount of support from community partners and local service providers. She attributed this support to a greater awareness of PLN’s role in a community prevention solution, and the knowledge that HIV/AIDS can affect everyone regardless of their demographic.

The increase in requests to the PLN education department is also testament to the organization’s success and presence in the community. According to West, PLN is routinely contacted for presentations and workshops held at elementary schools, addiction treatment facilities, and even industry sites.

Meanwhile, at PLN’s Bulkley Valley office in Smithers, Manager Melanie Monds reported that its one-woman play, *HIV Unmasked*, has been received with great acclaim.

“It’s so great to hear a high school student come up and say, ‘That’s way better than a pamphlet!’ It’s had an amazing reception,” said Monds of the play which was performed in more than six communities in the north and northwest.

Monds noted that plans for the local Scotiabank AIDS Walk 2013 are well underway, with the event expected to exceed previous years’ successes in three Bulkley Valley communities: Smithers, Moricetown and Hazelton.

She added that PLN Bulkley Valley recently experienced what she called “a great coup for education” when staff was invited to set up a booth at the Canfor mill in Houston during Safety Week. The booth was manned 24/7 over the course of the week to ensure that all the shifts were covered. Monds estimated that between 250 to 300 people visited the booth asking questions about HIV and receiving educational information.

“It may seem small, but it’s a huge victory to be able to give out information and build relationships with these people we might never get a chance to reach out to,” said Monds. •