New HIV testing guidelines in BC

A 23-year-old male presents to student health services with a mononucleosis-like syndrome. A 42-year-old previously healthy, married woman presents to her long-time family physician with a 3-month history of easy bruising and weight loss. A 57-year-old man presents to the emergency department with fever and shortness of breath. A 60-year-old man, at his first visit with a new family physician, is screened for type 2 diabetes. Would you include an HIV test in the blood work ordered for these patients? Until now, most of us would have said “no.” And this is what the provincial health officer’s new recommendations aim to change by recommending that clinicians know the HIV status of all patients under their care.

Why the change?

Until now, many physicians offered an HIV test when a patient seemed at risk for acquiring HIV or presented with signs and symptoms of advanced HIV disease. Only in the antenatal setting was an HIV test offered to all patients, regardless of the patient’s or the provider’s perception of risk. Routine HIV testing in pregnancy has been tremendously successful, virtually eliminating mother-to-child transmission of HIV in British Columbia. But the success of routine HIV testing in pregnancy has not been translated to the general population, for whom HIV testing has largely remained based on risk perception.

Until evidence became compelling that HIV diagnosis at the earliest opportunity has significant clinical and public health benefits, this approach did not come into ques-

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Providers offer HIV testing whenever indicated by clinical or public health criteria. They were drafted by a working group of rural and urban family physicians and specialists in general medicine, HIV care, sexual health, public health, and laboratory medicine. These guidelines recommend that health care providers know the HIV status of all patients under their care.

Specifically, we recommend that providers offer an HIV test:
- Routinely (every 5 years) to all patients aged 18 to 70 years.
- Routinely (every year) to all patients aged 18 to 70 years who belong to populations with a higher burden of HIV infection.
- Once at age 70 or older if the patient’s HIV status is not known.

And offer an HIV test to patients, including adults 18 to 70, youth, and the elderly, whenever:
- They present with a new or worsening medical condition that warrants laboratory investigation.
- They present with symptoms of HIV infection or advanced HIV disease.
- They or their providers identify a risk for HIV acquisition.
- They request an HIV test.
- They are pregnant.

Detailed recommendations are available at hivguide.ca.

Frequency of testing of asymptomatic patients is dependent on local epidemiology and testing practices. The optimum frequency of HIV testing in British Columbia is not yet known and the recommended frequency for testing may change over time. Testing rates, diagnostic yield, and stage of disease at diagnosis will be evaluated, leading to refinement of these recommendations. With this new guidance, British Columbia joins other jurisdictions in promoting the earliest possible diagnosis of HIV infection for all patients.

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References