

Dr. Peter Centre marks hits and misses in fight against AIDS (with video)

B.C. leads the battle in Canada, developing approaches now used throughout the world

BY TARA CARMAN, VANCOUVER SUN DECEMBER 1, 2014



B.C. Health Minister Terry Lake, left, and Shirley Young, Dr. Peter's mother, serve breakfast at the Dr. Peter Centre in Vancouver Monday.

Doctors count successes in the fight against HIV and AIDS with statistics, measuring how many fewer deaths and new diagnoses each year.

Eileen Young measures it in years — 10, to be precise — that she was able to spend with her brother Ken Burke while he was in the care of the Dr. Peter Centre.

Burke was diagnosed with HIV in the 1980s, when it was still considered a death sentence. He faced the diagnosis with bravery and good humour, Young said, but his health eventually deteriorated to the point where he was admitted first to a hospice and then to the Dr. Peter residence, where his health began to steadily improve.

Burke died in August at age 51, Young said at an event at the centre Monday to mark World AIDS Day. While this is still far too young, Young said her time with her brother — who did not die from AIDS-related causes — would have been much shorter had he not received the compassionate care he did.

B.C. Health Minister Terry Lake, on hand to mark the occasion, said that while it's important to take time to remember those who have been lost to HIV and AIDS over the years, residents of this province can be proud of the advances in AIDS research that have taken place here.

Dr. Julio Montaner and his colleagues at the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS pioneered the highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) program, which now allows people with HIV to live a near-normal lifestyle.

This approach, which included going into the community to seek out undiagnosed people living with HIV, has been replicated around the world, Lake said. B.C. is also the only province showing a consistent decline in HIV diagnoses: 238 in 2012 compared with 850 in the mid 1990s, Lake said.

That said, there are still an estimated 12,000 people living with HIV in B.C. who need to be supported, and other provinces have not had the same success in fighting the disease.

"We know in Saskatchewan, for instance, there's a large increase in HIV infections, particularly in First Nations communities," Lake said. "We need to share the work that's been done in B.C. to other places. But even here in B.C. ... we need to normalize HIV testing. There should be no stigma in having an HIV test. Until we know who is carrying the virus, we can't eliminate it."

Maxine Davis, executive director of the Dr. Peter AIDS Foundation, emphasized that people living with HIV often have multiple other health concerns.

“When a person is challenged by many difficult life and health circumstances, there is a high risk of instability of HIV treatment,” she said. “Stabilizing lives will stabilize HIV treatment. The results: undetectable viral loads and almost eradicated risk of HIV transmission.”

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