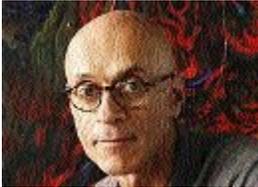


# Drug-resistant infections drop dramatically as HIV treatments improve

Transmission rates should decrease, says author of study that involved 5,500 patients over a decade

BY DENISE RYAN, VANCOUVER SUN

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Artist Tiko Kerr fought to receive experimental treatment.

**Photograph by:** Glenn Baglo, PNG files, Vancouver Sun

The number of HIV patients who develop drug-resistant infections is dropping dramatically in B.C. as a result of improved treatments, says the author of a newly published study on the issue.

“This is good news, with big implications,” said Dr. Richard Harrigan of the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS.

His study, published in the Jan. 1 edition of *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, reports that between 1996 and 2008, there has been a 12-fold decrease in drug resistance.

When treatments keep the virus from replicating, the disease doesn't progress and attack the immune system, explained Harrigan. “If you develop resistance, you're in trouble.”

HIV-positive Vancouver artist Tiko Kerr was near death just five years ago because of drug resistance.

“You can't imagine what it's like to be given your life back,” said an emotional Kerr, who has been HIV-positive for 25 years.

Kerr was one of five seriously ill B.C. AIDS patients who had to fight to get what were then experimental treatments -- their last chance for survival.

“Within the first five days of my new treatment in 2006, my viral load was reduced 90 per cent.”

Harrigan attributes the decline in new cases of HIV-1 drug resistance to “steady improvement” over the years.

“In the early days, people would have to take 30 pills a day,” said Harrigan. Side-effects were often brutal. “Now it's often just one pill a day.”

He also cited the centralized distribution of drugs in B.C., a focus on prescribing, using and having patients take them correctly as contributing factors to the slowdown in drug resistance among patients.

Harrigan said the main thing revealed by the study was that HAART therapies -- highly active antiretroviral therapy -- “are becoming more successful every year in keeping the level of virus in patients down below the level we can even detect.

“That prevents the virus from replicating, from making copies of itself and the disease doesn't progress.”

It also means less drug-resistant HIV is being passed on “from patient A to patient B.”

Harrigan said 5,500 patients were involved in the study over the course of a decade.

The success of the study, argued Harrigan, provides a rationale to expand the number of people on therapies “not only for their own benefit, but for the benefit of the community.”

Dr. Julio Montaner, director of the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, said: “The findings of this study are a big win for HIV-positive individuals in B.C. because they show that the current HIV management strategies, supported by the B.C. government, are working.”

The B.C. government has announced a commitment to a “seek and treat” pilot project that will expand access to HIV drugs to the street-involved population in downtown Prince George and Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, said Montaner, who is also the physician who fought to get Kerr the drugs he needed to survive.

Under the seek and treat model, health workers go into marginalized communities to identify potential patients and expand access to anti-retroviral drugs.

Harrigan estimates that only half the people infected with HIV in B.C. are aware they are infected.

“We've got improved levels of control in B.C. but this disease hasn't gone away,” he said. “It's become more and more obvious that treating people earlier is beneficial,” said Harrigan.

The drop in new cases of drug-resistant HIV is very good news, said Rosalind Baltzer Turjae, director of operations at Vancouver's Dr. Peter Centre, but she cautioned that education and support are a necessary part of successful treatment.

Maxine Davis, executive director of the Dr. Peter Centre, said most of the people not getting treatment come from extremely marginalized environments: the homeless, the drug-addicted, the mentally ill.

They need help to get help.

“When someone in that situation is able to go to a place every day and get the treatment, food, counselling and support, we can succeed,” she said.

Kerr is a supporter of harm reduction programs.

“Countries that have harm reduction programs in place have seen a drop of 19 per cent a year in new HIV diagnoses. In countries that don't have harm reduction, new AIDS infections rise eight per cent per year.”

Although many HIV patients are asymptomatic and living with the disease as a treatable chronic illness, Kerr said awareness, education and government action are urgently needed.

“People hear about the new drugs and unfortunately that breeds a real cavalier sexual practice. Unsafe sex is rampant. Vancouver is very bad for it, I don't know how to get the message out.”

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