

# Centre offers safety for those aging with HIV

Men who live with the virus lose many of their friends as they get older, but a program in B.C. is trying to fill the gap and beat the stigma

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Around a communal table in Vancouver's West End, a group of men gathers for supper, the late afternoon sunlight spilling in through large windows from the courtyard.

Their plates are piled high and the conversation is lively. There is talk of Pride plans, and a new movie in theatres. One man in his 60s says he just went skydiving the day before.

"When you have this diagnosis," he says, "nothing else really scares you."

Dinners like this close the weekly men's evening program at the Dr. Peter Centre, held every Wednesday. After activities such as art therapy and music trivia, participants gather in the facili-

ty's dining area to enjoy a meal and conversation.

The program, the only of its kind in Canada, caters to men with HIV over the age of 50. It launched in 2017 with so few participants that organizers wondered if it would stay afloat; today it has nearly reached its capacity of 40.

An HIV diagnosis was once likened to a death sentence, and medications – 15 or 20 pills a day, on a strict schedule – came with brutal side effects. But significant improvements in treatment – and, in particular, antiretroviral therapies – mean that people diagnosed and engaged in treatment today can live relatively normal lives, with life expectancy approaching that of their HIV-negative counterparts.

This has left the Dr. Peter Centre with the good problem of needing to accommodate this growing demographic.

The centre, named after Vancouver physician Peter Jepson-Young, opened in 1997 to provide specialized health services and support to those living with HIV. Executive director Scott Elliott said the facility launched its eve-

ning program after hearing more and more from older clientele who were experiencing new sets of problems.

"Aging sucks for everybody, but in this population, we're seeing a lot of the illnesses that affect everybody – neurological, cognitive, frailty and depression – happening at a much younger age," he said.

Kate Salters and Katrina Koehn, a postdoctoral fellow and research assistant at the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, respectively, have noted that older adults with HIV share distinct health needs and may be managing multiple chronic health conditions such as cancer and heart disease.

Moreover, these conditions affect people living with HIV much earlier than those without: in their 50s and 60s, compared with their 70s and 80s, they said.

There is also the unique weight of growing old having lost many friends to the virus far too young.

And so, once a week, men over 50 gather at the centre for activities and a meal. With the need to self-censor absent, references to living with HIV slip in and out of

conversation as naturally as book or movie recommendations.

Mr. Elliott said the centre would like to expand the program, and create a separate women's program, but is not yet certain about funding. ViiV Healthcare, a pharmaceutical company that specializes in HIV treatments, provided the centre with \$100,000 over two years to operate the men's program.

Bill Woodfine, 65, lives in Penitction but attends the evening program at the Dr. Peter Centre whenever he is in Vancouver, calling it the only place where he feels completely safe.

"There is no pretence here, they provide services and everybody is welcome," he said. "No value judgments are made."

Mr. Woodfine also spoke of a kind of shorthand among those living with HIV – drug interactions, difficulty eating, stigma and feeling fatigued – "things that we don't need to discuss because it's understood."

Tim O'Neil, 57, got involved with the evening program when it first launched after hearing about the dinner and thinking it might be a good social opportunity.

"My generation, I lost a lot of my friends," he said. "I don't know if it's true or not, but it sort of feels like there's a deficit of people my age, because they died. A lot of my peers of my age are gone. They died in the 1980s and '90s. So it feels like I should have more friends. This kind of fills that gap."

One man said he did not want to be named because "I have seen too much evidence of stigma and I already feel isolated in my life. I'm afraid that if it became known more broadly, I would be even more isolated, more shut off, from the mainstream of society."

He likened being diagnosed with HIV to having a curtain falling on every aspect of his life and said, for that reason, trying to treat this demographic in a regular medical clinic is not enough.


"It requires something greater to bridge that gap, to bring us in, to make us feel that we belong and are welcomed," he said.

"And that is why a group such as the Dr. Peter Centre is so important, because it becomes a safe place for people who are HIV positive to not just be themselves, but to be in the company of others who can understand."



## Regulated supply is the only way out of B.C.'s opioid crisis

JORDAN WESTFALL

 OPINION

supply is respect for an individual's right to use drugs. For more than a century, people who use illicit drugs have been criminalized and relegated to obtaining drugs