



B.C. Premier Christy Clark (left) and Dr. Julio Montaner (right) discuss Treatment as Prevention on December 1, World AIDS Day, at the Dr. Peter Centre

BC-CfE Treatment as Prevention campaign promotes routine testing in HIV

New 'Share the Pledge, Take the Test' social media initiative to help end HIV
The BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) marked December 1, World AIDS Day, by launching a social media campaign that encourages the province's youth to get tested for HIV and in the process, help end the epidemic.

The campaign calls for sexually active people to 'Share the Pledge, Take the Test' by pledging to take a voluntary, confidential HIV test and if they choose, share their pledge with their friends. The campaign promotes the BC-CfE-pioneered Treatment as Prevention strategy as the way towards an AIDS-free generation. The launch includes an interactive website, www.treatmentasprevention.ca, where visitors can pledge to take the HIV test, share their pledge if they wish with friends through Facebook and Twitter, and learn about Treatment as Prevention, HIV and AIDS.

"The Treatment as Prevention campaign is about creating a social movement to stop the spread of HIV," said Dr. Julio Montaner, director, BC-CfE. "We want to engage people in a dialogue about HIV/AIDS, and provide a venue for them to share their experiences and normalize testing. Testing for HIV is a critical first step to help people stay healthy and prevent further HIV infections in our community and, in the process, help defeat HIV and AIDS."

The Treatment as Prevention strategy involves widespread HIV testing and administering anti-HIV drugs known as Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy (HAART) to medically eligible individuals who

are HIV positive. The benefits of HAART are twofold: it reduces the level of HIV in the blood to undetectable levels, improving the health of people with HIV, while also decreasing the level of HIV in sexual fluids to undetectable levels, reducing the likelihood of HIV transmission by more than 95 per cent.

Montaner marked the launch of the testing campaign by meeting with the community and providing updates on the Treatment as Prevention strategy at local events and through national media interviews. Speaking at the Dr. Peter Centre to a packed house alongside BC Premier Christy Clark and Dr. Peter AIDS Foundation Executive Director Maxine Davis, Montaner noted the key role played by the BC government in generously funding HIV research and care.

He added that Vancouver and BC are now at the forefront of HIV/AIDS innovation, and Treatment as Prevention is endorsed by leading organizations such as the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the Clinton Foundation.

"Treatment as Prevention is the new way forward," he said. "We need to do it for the good of our children and we can do it."

Clark agreed. "When you think about the savings for those families whose loved ones are now alive today or who are no longer struggling the way that they did before, it's incalculable," she said.

Voluntary, confidential testing for HIV will identify and help people with HIV receive the treatment they require. An approximate 2,500 people in British Columbia from all walks of life, have HIV and are not aware of their status. It is critical that testing be implemented province-wide.

Vancouver Coastal Health and Providence Health Care have also recently launched a comprehensive social marketing campaign called "It's Different Now" (www.itsdifferentnow.org). The It's Different Now and Treatment as Prevention campaigns are leading efforts in BC to move HIV testing beyond what are considered at-risk groups and into the mainstream. Only through comprehensive programs that normalize HIV testing for all British Columbians will BC optimize efforts and resources to defeat HIV and reach the goal of an AIDS-free generation.

» Over the past two decades, British Columbia has led the way in HIV and AIDS research and care. The eyes of the world will again be on BC as it moves to normalize HIV testing and make it the mainstream medical intervention it should be."

- Stephen Lewis, founder of the Stephen Lewis Foundation (SLF), which provides care and support to people living with HIV and AIDS in Africa, discussing the BC-CfE's Treatment as Prevention campaign

» See full story above



Stop the Violence BC stirs debate on cannabis prohibition

Over the past two months, Stop the Violence BC has put the issue of gang violence and crime stemming from marijuana prohibition firmly on the public agenda. The coalition's call to tax and regulate marijuana under a strict public health framework, with the aim of reducing social harms including gang activity, has been heard throughout British Columbia and across Canada.

Since Stop the Violence BC's public launch on October 27, the media have asked Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Premier Christy Clark and mayors throughout the province about the ineffectiveness of marijuana prohibition and the gang violence associated with it, and whether they agree with a regulated marijuana market.

While some political leaders have not endorsed Stop the Violence BC or its position, the coalition has more than met its goal to generate and drive discussion in the media, among politicians and within the general public.

"With this overwhelming public support for change, and the overwhelming evidence of the damage done by marijuana prohibition, one would expect politicians to respond," said a Nov. 7 *Vancouver Sun* editorial, which referenced the Stop the Violence BC campaign. "Our leaders have a responsibility to implement and support measures that will protect the public, rather than doing the opposite. And since the evidence is in — since we know what will increase and decrease violence — it's time for politicians to detail exactly how they plan to reduce gang violence in the future. And it's time the public demanded that politicians do so."

The Stop the Violence BC coalition consists of law enforcement officials, legal experts, public health officials and academic experts. The coalition is led by some of British Columbia's foremost leaders in public health, including British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) researchers Dr. Evan Wood, Dr. Julio Montaner and Dr. Thomas Kerr. The coalition's first report, titled *Breaking the Silence*, outlines the links between cannabis prohibition in BC, the growth of organized crime, and the expansion of related violence in the province. The report also defines the public health concept known as "regulation" and sets the stage for a much-needed public conversation around alternatives to cannabis prohibition.

"From a scientific and public health perspective we know that making marijuana illegal has not achieved its stated objectives of limiting marijuana supply or rates of use," said Dr. Wood, a coalition member and director of the Urban Health Research Initiative at the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS. "Given that marijuana prohibition has created a massive financial windfall for violent



Dr. Evan Wood, Co-director of the Urban Health Research Initiative at the BC-CfE and Stop the Violence BC Coalition member, is calling for marijuana to be strictly regulated under a public health framework.

organized crime groups in BC, we must discuss alternatives to today's failed laws with a focus on how to decrease violence, remove the illicit industry's profit motive, and improve public health and safety."

Angus Reid polling data released with the first report shows that lawmakers lag far behind public opinion on revamping marijuana laws in BC. In fact, 87 per cent of BC respondents link gang violence to organized crime's efforts to control the province's massive illegal cannabis trade, and a mere 12 per cent of British Columbians support keeping current marijuana laws in place.

On November 23rd, four former Vancouver mayors — Larry Campbell, Mike Harcourt, Philip Owen and Sam Sullivan — wrote a joint letter to all BC MPs, MLAs, mayors and councilors urging politicians to reconsider marijuana laws and stop gang violence. The open letter, which demands that politicians recognize that marijuana prohibition has failed and urges them to develop alternative marijuana policies that avert the social and criminal harms that stem directly from cannabis prohibition, received extensive media coverage and support.

As a result of the former mayors' letter, current Vancouver mayor Gregor Robertson and current Burnaby mayor Derek Corrigan have since come forward to endorse ending marijuana prohibition.

The coalition will release more reports and polling data in the months to come. But already the campaign has gained significant attention in the media, with over 125 broadcast and print stories from across the country, including George Strombouloupoulos, CTV News Channel, Global BC, the *National Post* and the *Province*.

Research

BC-CfE researchers receive international awards for AIDS research

Dr. Julio Montaner, director of the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE), has been awarded the Hope is a Vaccine Award 2011 (International Category) in honour of his worldwide advocacy for Treatment as Prevention and his forceful call for expanded access to antiretroviral therapy. Dr. Montaner shares the 2011 Award with Dr. Myron Cohen, who received the award for his dedication to providing a scientific foundation for the Treatment as Prevention approach.



Canadian Institutes of Health Research President Dr. Alain Beaudet presents The Peter Lougheed/CIHR New Investigator Salary Award to Dr. Kate Shannon

The approach is strongly supported by statistics just released by the Joint United Nations Programme for HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), including estimates that 700,000 AIDS-related deaths were prevented in 2010 alone due to improved access to care. "In the absence of a vaccine, the Treatment as Prevention approach is our most effective tool in the fight to end HIV and AIDS," said Dr. Montaner.

The Hope is a Vaccine Award is awarded annually around World AIDS Day on December 1st by the GAIA Vaccine Foundation. It is awarded to deserving individuals working in the international, national, and local fight against HIV/AIDS, and highlights the important work done by individuals fighting AIDS and improving HIV care for people living at the margins of society.

At a special ceremony on November 16th in Ottawa, the Government of Canada recognized Dr. Kate Shannon with The Peter Lougheed/CIHR New Investigator Salary Award at the 2011 Canadian Health Research Awards, hosted by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) and Prix Galien Canada.

The award, which recognizes the top-ranked new investigator in Canada in 2010, was given to Dr. Shannon for her groundbreaking research on the impact of prostitution laws on health outcomes.

"It is an honour to be recognized and rewarding to have additional attention focused on this important subject," said Dr. Shannon. Dr. Shannon is also a recipient of a Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research (MSFHR) Career Investigator/Scholar Award this year.

CATIE

Organizations address social needs of gay and bisexual men

The suicide of 15-year-old James Hubley brought to light the horrors of being bullied and served as a reminder that homophobia, rejection experienced when "coming out", and a lack of sustaining social networks, play a huge role in the health of many gay and bisexual men in Canada.

It is reported that one in 10 hate crimes is motivated by sexual orientation, and over 40 per cent of gay and bisexual men report experiencing discrimination. In addition, research is also showing that epidemics of bullying, racial prejudice, depression, substance use, and HIV reinforce each other and lower the overall health of gay and bisexual men. In addition, poorer health conditions related to these stresses and social challenges are sometimes linked to high-risk sex which, in turn, increases the chances of transmitting HIV, hepatitis C and other sexually transmitted infections.

In response to these issues, some health and social agencies serving lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and two-spirited communities are adopting a broader, more social approach to gay and bisexual men's health to help build personal strength and resilience.

HIM (Health Initiative for Men — www.checkhimout.ca), a Vancouver-based agency dedicated to strengthening the overall health and well-being of gay men, is one such organization. HIM attends to the physical, sexual, social and mental health needs of their community.

The Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange (CATIE), is a Canadian source for up-to-date, unbiased information about HIV and hepatitis C. CATIE connects people living with HIV or hepatitis C, at-risk communities, healthcare providers and community organizations with the knowledge, resources and expertise to reduce transmission and improve quality of life. For more information on gay men's dialogue about health, please visit the CATIE website at: www.catie.ca.

HAARTbeats

Prime Minister lists Bahamas' recent successes in the fight against HIV

During the 2011 Caribbean HIV Conference on November 18, the Rt. Hon. Hubert Ingraham, Prime Minister of the Bahamas, recognized the value of treating HIV and AIDS early, and noted that recent successes included the decline in new HIV cases, a major reduction in mother-to-child transmission, and decreased mortality.

Quoted in The Bahamas Weekly, the Prime Minister noted that the Bahamian government funds generic antiretroviral drugs for residents, and has been a leader in developing legislation to protect the rights of those living with HIV. In addition, the six young people born HIV-positive in the Bahamas are all alive and living relatively normal lives.

"Care is provided for all who need it, irrespective of immigration status. This includes clinical care and support, diagnostic testing and antiretroviral treatment," he said.

There is still much work to be done, however. AIDS remains a leading cause of death among Bahamians aged 25-44 years.

BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS

- > Improve the health of British Columbians with HIV through comprehensive research and treatment programs;
- > Develop cost-effective research and therapeutic protocols;
- > Provide educational support programs to health-care professionals;
- > Monitor the impact of HIV/AIDS on B.C. and conduct analyses of the effectiveness of HIV-related programs.

Physician Drug Hotline
1.800.665.7677

St. Paul's Hospital Pharmacy Hotline
1.888.511.6222

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