

POLICY POSITION

Viral Load of PLWHA on Treatment and Potential to Transmit HIV

April 2008

ACON acknowledges that many gay men, especially those in sero-discordant relationships, are already using viral load monitoring in some ways as a risk reduction strategy.

We recognise that a person on effective treatments with an undetectable viral load and free of other sexually transmissible infections (STIs) is unlikely to pass on HIV.

However, we understand that the criteria necessary to ensure viral load stays undetectable are very difficult to sustain over long periods of time for homosexually active men in NSW. There are many factors that can lead to a fluctuation in viral load such as the presence of STIs which are at high rates in our community.

For these reasons we do not wholly support the Swiss Statement as it is too definitive in its outcomes.

Using condoms and water-based lube remains the most effective strategy in preventing the transmission of HIV and other STIs.

ACON recognises that viral load monitoring can reduce the risk of passing on HIV, however it is not a reliable alternative for our community.

BACKGROUND

In February 2008, the Swiss National AIDS Commission released a statement (known as the "Swiss Statement") which, based on research, concluded that HIV-positive people who are on effective anti-retroviral therapy, have an undetectable viral load, and who do not have an STI, are not at risk of transmitting HIV to their sexual partners.

Specifically, the Commission stated that HIV-positive people are not at risk for transmitting HIV to their partners if they meet all of the following requirements:

1. they are adherent to highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART),
2. their viral load in the blood is consistently below the lower level of detection (< 40 copies/ml) and
3. they do not have any sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

The statement, published in the medical journal *Bulletins Medicines Suisses* on behalf of the Swiss Federal Commission for HIV/AIDS, was authored by four of Switzerland's foremost HIV experts. The four reached this consensus after reviewing medical literature on studies based on heterosexual couples.

KEY ISSUES

The Swiss Statement is a significant point in the international history of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, as it is the first time that a consensus statement has been produced by a peak HIV/AIDS body, which states that HIV-positive individuals on effective antiretroviral therapy and without sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are sexually non-infectious. Consequently, the statement has received considerable international media attention and reaction from institutions and professionals working in the HIV/AIDS sector.

The statement is based on sound research and may offer good news for heterosexual serodiscordant couples, particularly those who wish to conceive a child with minimal medical intervention or may experience a condom breakage during sex. However, there are several factors which make the value of the statement limited for most people with HIV and at risk of contracting HIV in Australia. These include:

Uncertainty about applicability to anal sex and gay men

The statement was made following a review of studies which had been conducted on heterosexual couples. Further investigation would have to be conducted on homosexual men to establish the risk of transmission while there was an undetectable viral load present in blood. The genital tracts of men and women have a different viral load from that of their blood. Also Men taking HAART may have a suppressed viral load in their blood, but viral load in their semen may not be similarly suppressed.

It is generally accepted that there is a significantly higher likelihood of HIV transmission during anal than vaginal sex.

Sexually Transmitted Infections

The presence of an STI can lead to an increase in a person's viral load and an increase in viral activity around the site of the infection. A person may have symptoms that lead to higher infectiousness without being aware of them..

Given the high prevalence of STIs among gay and other homosexually active men there is a continuing potential for fluctuation in a person's viral load or increased infectiousness without the infected person being aware.

Adherence

The maintenance of an undetectable viral load through treatment by HAART relies heavily on strict adherence to the prescribed regimen. The reality for most people with HIV on treatments is that their lives necessitate a degree of flexibility in their treatments regime. Adherence is a dynamic behaviour and many HIV positive people on treatments see fluctuations in viral load over time.

HIV replication

Relying on the presence of undetectable viral load in the blood is not sufficient information to prevent infection, as HIV replication continues to take place in the body despite a low viral load in the blood. New copies of HIV can be produced in many parts of the body, such as the genital tract and the rectum.