

# NEWSREEL

## News from home and around the world

### Advocacy alert

The BC Ministry of Health is routinely rejecting special authority requests for testosterone with little reason, which is affecting the quality of life of many people living with HIV/AIDS. Testosterone is prescribed for PWAs to fend off wasting.

Pharmacare delisted testosterone and put it under Special Authority Process. Doctors can make a special request for testosterone on behalf of a patient if they feel it is necessary for the health of the patient.

The BCPWA Society is working with the Ministry of Health to resolve this issue.

### Ottawa researchers find new way to attack HIV

Ottawa researchers have found a way to attack HIV where it hides from other drugs and reduce it to undetectable levels, according to a report published in the journal *Virology*.

The finding, by researchers at the Ottawa Hospital Research Institute, offers some of the strongest hope that it may be possible to remove all HIV from a person's body. Research is still in the early stages.

When HIV infects the body, it attacks the immune system, killing T-cells. Some of the infected cells don't die right away and instead remain dormant for years, creating a reservoir for the virus.

As a result, HIV remains hidden in cells, even though patients appear otherwise free of disease. Researchers have found that when HIV-infected patients stop taking their drug "cocktails," the virus returns.

The research team reports that a naturally occurring protein can reduce the level of HIV to undetectable levels in those dormant cells. However, they caution against raising false hopes for a cure. Source: *Canadian Press*

### Regionalization back on the agenda?

For the third time in eight years, the provincial government is significantly reshaping health care delivery in BC, which may renew the possibility of regionalization of services for PWAs.

In December, BC Minister of Health Planning Sindi Hawkins announced the collapsing of 52 regional health authorities into five, resulting in the immediate termination of 600 health board members. The restructuring is expected to lead to hundreds of layoffs.

This may be the first step in the regionalization of services provided for people living with HIV/AIDS. Earlier in the year, then Health Minister Corky Evans announced he would not force regionalization upon AIDS organizations that did not want it.



*Naomi Brunemeyer, BCPWA Director of Communications, and volunteer Chad Conley at a reception for delegates of the Pacific AIDS Network (PAN) annual forum. AIDS Vancouver and the BCPWA Society hosted the reception at the Pacific AIDS Resource Centre.*

### Ecstasy lowers CD4 counts

Researchers in the European Union have been studying the impact of ecstasy on the immune systems of mice and people and have found some troubling data.

Seventeen healthy male subjects received 100 mg ecstasy once or twice over a period of 24 hours. Blood samples were collected before, during and after the study.

The researchers found that a single dose of ecstasy (100 mg) taken by mouth caused a 30% decrease in CD4 cells within hours. Within a day after taking this dose, CD4 cell levels returned to normal.

Among subjects who received two doses of the drug, four hours apart, the decline in CD4 cells was even more serious, reaching a level 40% below normal. Although T-cell levels rose a day later, they did not return to normal.

Another important finding is that ecstasy clearly reduced the ability of T-cells as well as other immune system cells to fight infections.

*This information was provided by the Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange (CATIE). For more information, contact CATIE at 1-800-263-1638.*

### Old drug offers new hope

A drug that has been in use for over a decade to treat prostate cancer may prove to be a critical breakthrough in helping to fight off diseases in people living with HIV/AIDS. The effect of leutinizing hormone releasing hormone (LHRH) is being evaluated in a series of Melbourne-based pilot studies for its potential to rebuild the immune system by stimulating the thymus gland.

Researchers in Melbourne are hoping LHRH will increase the levels of T-cells produced by the thymus.

Source: *Victoria Positive Women in Australia, www.home.aone.net.au/pos.women*

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## Addicts to get heroin under research project

A federal government agency will give doctors money to provide heroin to about 125 drug addicts in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal under a national research project searching for an effective way to cut crime and control the cost of caring for injection-drug users.

The drug could be offered by next summer to people who have been addicted more than a year. Addicts in the program must have tried at least twice to get off heroin by using the substitute drug methadone. Under the Narcotics Control Act, heroin can be prescribed by doctors to patients in hospital.

The project has not received final approval. Full funding for the clinical trials has not been confirmed.

One-third of the drug users in this study are HIV-positive and more than 90 per cent are infected with hepatitis C.

Source: *The Globe and Mail*

## Pharmacare reviewing drug reference program

On November 23, BC Minister of Health Planning Sindi Hawkins announced the formation of an independent consultation panel to seek cost-effective alternatives to Pharmacare's reference drug program (RDP). The panel will solicit input from stakeholders, including physicians and pharmacists.

Under the RDP, Pharmacare creates groupings of drugs that treat the same condition and sets its coverage level for each group at the price of the most cost-effective drug. Pharmacare coverage of a more expensive drug within the group can be approved based on medical reasons presented by the patient's doctor.



*North American AIDS Treatment Action Forum (NATAF) delegates at a cocktail reception (l. to r.): Lance Toma and Claire Wingfield from San Francisco's Asian & Pacific Islander Wellness Center, Charles Clifton from Test Positive Aware Network in Chicago, and Adimika Meadows from the Seattle Treatment Education Program. Over 450 delegates participated in NATAF 2001 in Vancouver from December 2 to 5. The conference focused on treatment education, treatment action and skills building. The BCPWA Society was one of the host organizations.*

## AIDS WALK at Mountain Institution

The Chain Link Society, a peer-run organization dedicated to supporting and educating prisoners in Pacific Region correctional institutions, held another successful AIDS WALK at Mountain Institution in Agassiz, BC. The money raised was donated to the BCPWA Society's AIDS WALK.

Founded in 1997, the Chain Link Society's primary function is to educate the inmate population about the myths

and realities of HIV/AIDS and other life affecting conditions, and to reinforce healthy lifestyle practices within the prison environment. They operate the National HIV/AIDS Peer Education and Counselling Program. In conjunction with the Con AIDS Network Project, an inmate-based program, they produce over 200 pamphlets on topics ranging from proper diet to alternative treatment therapies. ⊕