



Getting the message

The pros and cons of partner notification in HIV prevention

by **Elgin Lim**

Partner notification is the voluntary and anonymous public health procedure of advising the partners of someone newly diagnosed as HIV-positive that they have been exposed to the virus. When referring to partner notification, the term “partner” includes not only sex partners of the person infected, but also people who have shared equipment for injection drug use or who have engaged in other high-risk activities for HIV exposure.

Notifying partners about possible HIV infection is an effective way to reduce the spread of HIV. The partner notification process provides the opportunity to communicate risk-reduction information to prevent further transmission of HIV by those who may be already infected, as well as HIV prevention information to those who may not be infected. Informing partners of potential exposure allows them the option to confirm their serostatus through HIV testing and, if infected, allows them to make important decisions with respect to accessing appropriate health care and treatment.

Options for partner notification

There are several ways in which HIV-related partner notification can be carried out. First, the newly diagnosed individual may

notify his or her partner(s) directly. If this method is selected, public health professionals can provide helpful information on how to approach partners, what to tell them, and where to refer them for appropriate follow-up services such as testing, counselling, and treatment if needed.

Second, the newly diagnosed individual may opt for their physician or an HIV public health nurse to contact and inform their partners. Individuals who prefer to keep their own identities and serostatus anonymous often select this method of notification. Notification carried out in this manner is undertaken by a physician or HIV public health nurse, and all possible efforts must be made to protect the confidentiality of the client and his or her partner(s).

Finally, newly diagnosed individuals may choose to notify their partners with the assistance of their physician or an HIV public health nurse. For example, an individual may choose to notify a specific partner at his or her doctor’s office with the doctor present. Alternatively, an individual may also decide to notify his or her primary partner with the assistance of a physician or HIV public health nurse, but may leave the task of notifying other partners to an HIV public health nurse in order to maintain anonymity.

Whatever method is used, partner notification is a strictly voluntary process, done with the full consent of the HIV-positive individual. An HIV-positive person's refusal to participate in partner notification should in no way restrict their ability to access any health services they require.

Benefits and limitations

There are a number of compelling reasons to support partner notification. For instance, partner notification can identify partners who have been infected with HIV, but who are unaware of their exposure to the virus. In fact, some studies reveal that as many as 30 percent of an HIV-positive individual's past partners are unaware of their HIV status. In this case particularly, partner notification can promote early diagnosis of someone recently exposed, and can prevent the newly infected person from unknowingly transmitting the virus to others.

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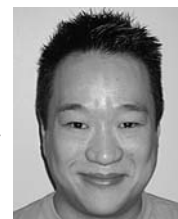
Another benefit to partner notification is its potential to help modify the high-risk behaviours of individuals before engaging in future risk activities. Research findings presented at

the Fourth Conference on Retrovirus and Opportunistic Infections in 1997 showed that rates of condom use were significantly higher, and the number of new sexual partners was lower, amongst the group of study participants who received HIV counselling resulting from partner notifications, compared to those who received no counselling.

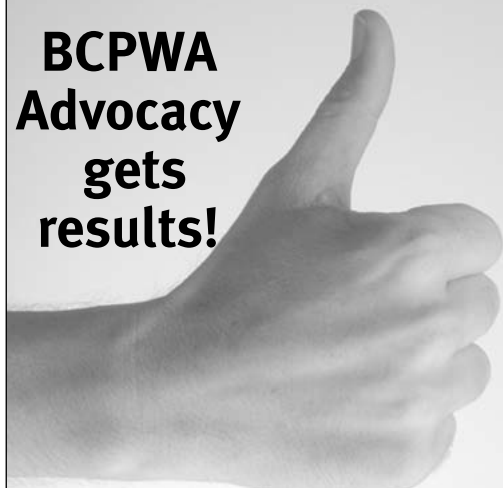
In addition to the benefits, however, it is also important to recognize the limitations associated with partner notification. Obviously, the ability to notify partners of a newly diagnosed individual is only as effective as the contact information provided by the individual. As well, the HIV-positive individual may not be able to identify a particular partner or partners in situations involving high-risk anonymous encounters. And, in some circumstances, it is possible that the HIV-positive individual simply does not want to disclose identifying information at all. Since partner notification requires the voluntary participation of the HIV-positive individual, some partners may not be notified.

Finally, partner notification should be conducted with great sensitivity and care, taking into account social and cultural factors, such as the possibility of violent reactions from past partners. In some cases, the only possible exposure to HIV may be from one individual; being able to identify who put them at risk of infection may be obvious. Domestic violence screening must be part of all post-test counselling before any form of partner notification is initiated. ⊕

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- **\$2,250** in ongoing monthly nutritional supplement benefit for children