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Sexual health experts call for earlier diagnosis of HIV

With nearly a third of HIV cases in the UK going undiagnosed, the Medical Foundation for AIDS & Sexual Health (MedFASH), has produced a booklet to help healthcare professionals to view HIV testing as part of routine screening when diagnosing their patients.

The booklet *HIV for non-HIV specialists: diagnosing the undiagnosed*¹ was funded by the Department of Health and has been released jointly with the new *UK National Guidelines for HIV Testing 2008* produced by the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH)², the British HIV Association (BHIVA)³ and the British Infection Society (BIS)⁴.

Today's joint launch is calling on health professionals who work in areas that are not usually associated with HIV, for example respiratory medicine, neurology and psychiatry, dermatology and paediatrics, to consider HIV testing as routine when making a diagnosis.

It is estimated that over 73,000 people in the UK have HIV but nearly a third of these are undiagnosed⁵. For the past five years there have been more than 7,000 new cases of HIV every year. A delayed diagnosis accounts for at least 35% of HIV-related deaths and also increases the chances of onward transmission.

Dr Rachel Baggaley, author of the booklet, said today:

"We need to normalise HIV testing and get the message across that there is nothing special about it. HIV testing is not difficult, it doesn't require special training or unique counselling skills. This booklet offers practical help to healthcare professionals about when to consider testing for HIV and how to talk to patients about this issue."

Dr Adrian Palfreeman of BASHH, and co-author of the guidelines, added:

"HIV was once considered to be a death sentence. This is no longer the case and with early diagnosis and antiretroviral therapy, HIV can be managed as a chronic disease. The problem is many patients are not being diagnosed early and this impacts on their chances of survival."

Dr Martin Fisher of BHIVA, and co-author of the guidelines, also said:

“Doctors should see HIV testing as part of routine screening when making a diagnosis. What is concerning is that many patients with HIV who are diagnosed late have often already been seen in other parts of the healthcare system but their HIV was not diagnosed.”

Dr Ed Ong of the BIS, and co-author of the guidelines, added:

“Every medical practitioner in UK should consider HIV as a possibility when dealing with patients particularly when the diagnosis is unclear as every patient who subsequently presents with an AIDS defining condition is a missed opportunity for early intervention.”

There is a number of clinical settings where there is a potentially increased HIV prevalence, for example, sexual health clinics, antenatal services, termination of pregnancy services and drug dependency programmes – routine HIV testing should be offered in these settings. There are also several groups at higher risk of HIV infection who should be offered routine HIV testing; these include anyone who has been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection, individuals with a current or former partner with HIV, all men who have sex with men, individuals who have a history of injecting drug use and people from countries with high HIV prevalence.

Ends

Notes to editors:

1. The Medical Foundation for AIDS & Sexual Health is a charity set up by the British Medical Association to promote excellence in the field of sexual health and HIV. Please click here to download the MedFASH booklet, *HIV for non-HIV specialists: diagnosing the undiagnosed* www.medfash.org.uk
2. The British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH) is the specialist society for GUM physicians. Please click here to download the new *UK National Guidelines for HIV Testing 2008* from the BASHH website www.bashh.org
3. The British HIV Association is the specialist society for HIV physicians. Please click here to download the new *UK National Guidelines for HIV Testing 2008* from the BHIVA website www.bhiva.org
4. The British Infection Society is the specialist society for Infectious Disease physicians. Please click here to download the new *UK National Guidelines for HIV Testing 2008* from the BIS website www.britisheinfectionsociety.org
5. It is estimated that 73 000 people in the UK were living with HIV at the end of 2006. In 2007 there were 7 734 new diagnoses of HIV in the UK – latest data to June 2008 from the Health Protection Agency (HPA). More information on HIV epidemiology can be found on the HPA’s website – <http://www.hpa.org.uk/webw/HPAweb&Page&HPAwebAutoListName/Page/1200660065903?p=1200660065903>

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