

OLDER ADULTS—THE NEW FACES OF HIV

I recently attended a talk given by Dr. Julio Montaner, one of BC's experts on HIV. He mentioned that one of his patients had recently passed away. I'm sure most of the people in the room were surprised to hear his description of the patient: a 92-year old man who passed away in his sleep. His HIV had nothing to do with his death.

HIV treatment has become simpler, more effective and better tolerated, which has led to major improvements in health outcomes. Because the medications work to decrease the amount of virus in the blood and body fluids, people are healthier and more able to do the things they want to do. In addition to extending life expectancy, the medications make it less likely that people will transmit the virus to others.

Dr. Montaner and our Interior Health physicians regularly describe the "new face of HIV". Canadians beginning HIV treatment today can expect to live into their early 70s or longer, and it is estimated that over 30 per cent of people living with HIV in Canada are now aged 50 or older, a number that is likely to increase given that between 1985 and 2012, more than 30 per cent of new HIV diagnoses were among people over the age of 40.

I remember talking with Andrew, a resident of BC's Interior, he is one of those "new faces of HIV". He has lived with the disease for 23 years and has witnessed many advances in diagnosis and treatment. He told me he was pleased to see how far treatment has come but he also felt more could be done for those who are aging with HIV. He said now that many older adults are outliving HIV, the focus needs to shift to quality of life, elder care, and eliminating the social stigma that divides and isolates those who are HIV positive.

Now that people are living longer lives with HIV, some are experiencing health complications seen in older adults, such as cardiovascular disease, kidney disease and cancer. For many, living with HIV also means having to manage depression, social isolation, and social stigma. Fortunately, research has suggested that early diagnosis and initiation of HIV treatment can help mitigate the health complications that come with aging.

To support both the physical and mental health needs that come with HIV and aging, there are now additional resources that exist across the Interior Health, including specialized nurses who can provide outreach services for clients living with HIV and who also support HIV testing initiatives across the region.

New guidelines suggest that everyone should know their HIV status. If you don't, no matter how old you are, or what kind of risk you think you may or may not have, if you're going to the lab for blood work, ask your doctor to add an HIV test to the requisition.

If you want more information about the testing, treatment and supports available across Interior Health visit www.myhealthissexy.com.