

Autumn 2018

Numbers of heterosexuals diagnosed with HIV are not reducing!

In NSW, as in the rest of Australia, the total number of heterosexual people diagnosed with HIV is still much lower than the number of gay and bisexual men. However in NSW in 2017, there has been a significant decline in new diagnoses for gay and bisexual men, but not for heterosexuals.

Throughout Australia, people born overseas and heterosexual men and women are still being diagnosed late.

Being diagnosed late is when people test positive several years after the virus has started to damage their immune system. Being diagnosed when T-cells are lower than 350 is considered a late diagnosis. Late diagnosis is something to avoid as the health problems can be severe and ongoing.

Many people in the general community do not realise that heterosexual men and women get HIV and that heterosexuals in Australia currently make up about 1 in 5 diagnoses (21% in 2016). In 2016 almost half of heterosexual people diagnosed with HIV were diagnosed late. There was also a steady increase in Aboriginal diagnoses – many of these being heterosexuals.

In 2018 Pozhet will continue to work with other organisations and services to raise awareness about HIV testing and transmission, to reduce the numbers of heterosexual men and women diagnosed late in heterosexual populations.



Share your story

Do you have a story about being diagnosed late? Did you realise you might have been at risk of getting HIV? Did you ever consider getting a HIV test before you were diagnosed? Let us know. Stories can be as short or as long as you wish and can be anonymous if you prefer. Contact Pozhet to get started.



An undetectable viral load means no risk of transmission to partners



In September, 2017, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — confirmed that “people who take ART daily as prescribed and achieve and maintain an undetectable viral load have effectively no risk of sexually transmitting the virus to an HIV-negative partner.”

This is a big step forward for people with HIV. It is also great news for negative partners. If you are undetectable you cannot pass on HIV. For years scientific studies have proven this, and now we have confirmation from the highest authorities.

Professor Sharon Lewin, from the University of Melbourne’s Doherty Institute for Infection and Immunity, says that while it varies from person to person, people living with HIV generally achieve an undetectable viral load – measured through a blood test – after a month of taking antiretroviral medication.

“By six months we would expect nearly every patient to have an undetectable viral load. If a patient didn’t have an undetectable viral load by six months, we would then look at changing their treatment.”

“Together, that data tells us that the risk of transmitting the virus sexually, if your viral load is undetectable, is zero,” Professor Lewin says.

— Professor Sharon Lewin

So stay in touch with your HIV doctor, keep taking your medications and live your life happy, positive and free!

Inter view

Ariane, a counsellor from Lismore Sexual Health kindly agreed to answer a few questions about the Lismore Sexual Health service and the challenges for heterosexual people living with HIV in regional areas.

What does your service do?

We provide a free and confidential service, including check-ups and treatments for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV testing. We do HIV management, and I personally do counselling, support and advocacy. We also do some Hepatitis A and B vaccinations for people who are eligible and we are a secondary NSP (needle and syringe exchange provider). We do both morning booked appointments and afternoon drop-in clinics. We also do health education in terms of linking in with GPs. We run an outreach clinic at Byron Bay and are linked in with Clinic 145 at Tweed Heads.

Do you see many heterosexual people living with HIV, if so what services do they come for?

We do see heterosexual people living with HIV, and they often come to see the specialist so they can be prescribed HIV treatments: They attend Lismore Sexual Health for HIV management and counselling as well.

What are the key issues for heterosexuals living with HIV in regional and rural NSW?

I think that there is a huge issue with regards to confidentiality and disclosure. For example the two people that I'm seeing at the moment, they don't want anybody to know they're living with HIV. So these people don't want to have sexual relationships with anyone because they don't want to have to disclose.* They do not feel like they're going to travel down to Sydney to access services, it's too far for them, especially with petrol money. We also do peer-linkage here, but that doesn't guarantee that the clients want to be linked. I don't want to make gross generalisations, but it seems that it might be more difficult for the males that identify as heterosexual.

What kind of services do you think this population needs that are currently not provided?

We need some kind of general campaign that over time it becomes clear that you're not a pariah if you're a person living with HIV. In this area you feel a lot more vulnerable and visible, because it's not like a larger city where you have more anonymity.

I even have two couples living with HIV at the moment and neither of the couples wants anybody to know that they're living with HIV; it's very difficult and isolating. I think for the people living in our area that are gay and living with HIV there is more support, and they seem to be more likely to be upfront about it. There is also a history of gay people more readily using social media which has categories and options to identify as HIV positive so there are fewer stigmas, but I can't imagine RSVP having that.

* Since this interview was done, changes have been made to the law. A person with a sexually transmissible infection is no longer required by law to disclose that they have the condition prior to sexual intercourse – but they are required to take reasonable precautions such as condoms or HIV treatment (being undetectable). See www.halc.org.au

Lismore Sexual Health Service
4 Shepherd Lane, Lismore
(02) 6620 2980 (For appointments and inquiries)

New video led by Pozhet Consumer Group!

In 2018 we will be releasing an animation which has been developed by the Pozhet Consumer Group, which is a group of clients who meet regularly to advise Pozhet about issues for heterosexual people living with HIV. The idea and script was workshopped by the Consumer Group and we then worked with a consultant to create the animation. The 2 minute animation will be released on social media and will be available on the website and will hopefully raise awareness about heterosexuals and HIV in the general community. If you are interested in joining the Consumer Group, contact Pozhet for more information.



Pozhet team

From left back row: Chi and Solomon are from the team which manages Pozhet. From left in the front row is Jean Marie, Susan, Maxine and Peter. Peter is our IT and database wiz and Jean Marie, Susan and Maxine are Health Educators. If you call or visit Pozhet they will be the ones you talk to.

Plans for 2018

In 2018 Pozhet will be visiting services and clients throughout Sydney as well as the Hunter and the Illawarra regions. To ensure you receive updates about all our activities, join the Pozhet mailing list by ringing 1800 812 404 or emailing pozhet@pozhet.org.au with your contact details.

The Pozhet website has information about all upcoming events such as weekend retreats and the Annual Workshop. Instead of two retreats in 2018, we will be holding a larger, newer, more exciting retreat in September with room for 30 participants. Keep the weekend of 7-9th September free! The Annual Workshop will be on the 17th November and will hopefully be held in Parramatta.

Keep checking the website to stay up to date about groups and other events.

A partnership of services and women living with HIV is coordinating support groups for women throughout 2018. They are currently being held on the first Friday of each month at 11am. The May one is at Granville. Contact Pozhet for more information.

Social Media

Don't forget to follow Pozhet on the Pozhet Facebook page for Friends and Supporters of Pozhet. **@Pozhet**

We also have a secret Facebook group – email Susan on pozhet@pozhet.org.au for more information.

Pozhet has new management and a new place of work

Pozhet has moved to Camperdown and is now managed by the HIV and Related Programs (HARP) team in Sydney Local Health District. Most activities such as the Consumer group and the Drop-ins will be held at 18 Marsden Street, Camperdown. (It is next door to RPA Sexual Health and just off Missenden Road where RPA Hospital is). Just push the buzzer that says Pozhet. Larger events will be held at external venues throughout Sydney and in regional areas (where possible).