



HIV-Positive Women Call for Routine, Informed, Voluntary Testing and Linkage to Care on National HIV Testing Day

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Contact: Naina Khanna
510-681-1169

Friday June 26 -- The U.S. Positive Women's Network (PWN), a national membership body of women living with HIV, honors National HIV Testing Day (NHTD) by calling for strengthened HIV testing and counseling practices. NHTD is a united effort among organizations across the nation to engage communities in the promotion of early diagnosis and HIV testing. It is estimated that one-quarter of the approximately 1.2 million people living with HIV in the United States do not know their HIV status. Over 300,000 women are estimated to be living with HIV in the U.S.

Women living with HIV and those who work with them emphasize that medical providers should routinely offer everyone testing, regardless of perceived risk, and that providers should additionally be trained and compensated to provide appropriate counseling and obtain consent for administering an HIV test.

Many people, especially women, never see themselves as being at risk for HIV, say advocates for women with HIV. And medical providers often use their own judgment in determining who should be offered a test. This can result in late diagnosis, disease progression, and new infections. Standards of care should include a routine offer of voluntary testing for anyone engaging in medical care. But to achieve this, extensive training is needed for medical providers for whom offering testing may mean engaging in challenging or uncomfortable conversations with their patients.

"Doctors and other health care professionals need to take the lead on breaking stigma around HIV and the behaviors linked to HIV infection. It can be hard to talk with patients about their sex life, substance use, and other things going on in

their lives -- but we must have these difficult conversations with our patients so we can truly address their health and needs as a whole human being. If not us, then who?" says Dr. Monica Gandhi, MD, of San Francisco General Hospital.

As HIV testing becomes more routine, the provision of counseling has emerged as a key issue for those who may not see themselves as being at risk. "Culturally appropriate counseling is key to helping prevent and identify new infections," says Demetra Tennison, Peer Advocate at Women Rising in Austin, TX, who was diagnosed with HIV in 2001. A study released in 2004 showed that women not provided information about HIV were four times more likely to refuse HIV testing, underscoring the importance of pre-test counseling.

Advocates also have ideas about how to best design testing programs to meet the needs of people they're intended to serve. "Involving people with HIV and other community stakeholders in formulating plans for expanded testing programs is one way to ensure that testing is likely to yield favorable outcomes for those testing positive, including immediate linkage to care," says Naina Khanna, Coordinator of the U.S. Positive Women's Network. "It's estimated that nearly 50% of people living with HIV in the United States are not in regular medical care - mostly people of color and women. Would this be any different if they'd received appropriate pre-test counseling, information, and post-test referrals?"

HIV-positive women point to the need for increased training of providers in how to address HIV testing and care for those living with HIV. "When I was diagnosed at six months pregnant, everyone literally ran out of the medical office. That's how I was told I was HIV-positive. This led to me attempting suicide," says Cinnamen Kubricky, of San Diego, CA. As a result of this experience, Ms. Kubricky avoided medical care for years.

"An HIV diagnosis is a life-altering experience," says Waheedah Shabazz-El, Trainer with the Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project (CHAMP) and founding member of the Philadelphia Positive Women's Network. "And even if you test negative it doesn't mean you're off the hook forever. Would you offer cancer or diabetes testing or treatment, eliminating the opportunity for clear communication and understanding of the implications?"

The U.S. Positive Women's Network encourages people to get tested and know their status, and offers itself as a resource in designing prevention, testing and education programs that will meet the needs of women.

The U.S. Positive Women's Network is a project of WORLD (Women Organized to Respond to Life-threatening Disease) in Oakland, CA. We are a national membership body of women living with HIV in the United States. For more information please visit: www.womenhiv.org/positivewomen