

40 Years On - Victoria sees a drop in HIV diagnoses amid COVID-19 pandemic

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wednesday 30 November 2021 - In the lead up to World AIDS Day 2021, Victoria records its lowest quarterly total of HIV diagnoses in 20 years. While likely impacted by the restrictions in place during the COVID-19 pandemic, Thorne Harbour Health emphasises the ongoing need for HIV testing.

Last week Victoria's Department of Health reported 34 news cases of HIV for the third quarter of 2021, bringing the January to September total to 120 cases. Thorne Harbour CEO Simon Ruth welcomes the news.

"Since the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen a continued decrease in HIV notifications in Victoria and further afield. As we come out of lockdown, we have a unique opportunity before us to maintain that momentum, but testing for HIV is key. By getting tested for HIV today, you can look after your sexual health and wellbeing as well as that of your sexual partners."

The landscape surrounding HIV and AIDS has changed dramatically since the first cases were identified in 1981. With the introduction of highly active antiretroviral therapies in the mid 1990s, treating HIV has radically improved. HIV has become a chronic manageable illness, and the proportion of people living with HIV who develop AIDS-defining illnesses has reduced drastically. In fact, people living with HIV on treatment with a suppressed viral can expect to live a normal lifespan.

Furthermore, antiviral treatment has made it possible for people living with HIV to have an undetectable viral load (UVL) and unable to transmit the virus through sex - making it the most effective way to prevent HIV.

In the past decade, we've also seen the introduction of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) - highly effective medication that is taken by HIV-negative individuals to prevent them from acquiring HIV.

"We are in remarkable time of biomedical prevention. There are more ways to prevent HIV than ever before, but testing for HIV is paramount," said Simon Ruth.

"Knowing your HIV status as we transition into life after lockdown gives us the best shot as seeing a future with no new transmissions of HIV."

World AIDS Day 2021 will also mark the opening of Thorne Harbour's new Centre Clinic at the Victorian Pride Centre. Established in the 1980s, the Centre Clinic was originally setup to provide free health services to gay men during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Today, the Centre Clinic operates as a general practice for LGBTI community members and provides specialist medical care for people living with HIV.

"The Centre Clinic came into being as a result of the tireless efforts of community advocates that wanted to see a brighter future for people living with HIV and our LGBTIQ communities. From the clinic's humble beginnings at the Melbourne STD Clinic in the 1980s, we're incredibly proud to open the doors of our new premises at the Victorian Pride Centre," said Simon Ruth.

Victoria's HIV quarterly surveillance report is available online at:
<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/infectious-diseases/hiv-quarterly-surveillance-report>

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