

# 2005 Public Health Awards for Excellence and Innovation:

## Public Health Programs Award for Excellence

### **Pilot of a voluntary HIV sentinel surveillance system for men who have sex with men**

*Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health Research, Burnet Institute*

A pilot study conducted at five sexual health clinics in Victoria is obtaining timely sexual behaviour data to improve our understanding of the population at highest risk of HIV, men who have sex with men.

Conducted by the Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health Research, this is the first extensive, linked HIV sentinel surveillance system implemented in Australia.

This study responds to the considerable increase in the number of HIV notifications in Victoria since 1999. When HIV notifications first increased it was difficult to ascertain through the standard enhanced passive surveillance system whether this was a real increase in actual HIV infections or increased detection of cases due to changes in testing behaviour. If there was a true increase in HIV infections, what was driving it? To better understand the HIV epidemic in Victoria a surveillance system that could link HIV testing behaviour with results and risk behaviour was needed.

The voluntary HIV sentinel surveillance system strengthens the existing system of passive HIV surveillance, which records HIV notifications and collects risk information on individuals notified as HIV positive, not on individuals who have a negative HIV test result.

As part of the pilot sentinel surveillance system, doctors collected demographic, testing history, and sexual risk behaviour data using a standard questionnaire from clients not known to have HIV undergoing HIV testing. These data were merged with the HIV laboratory results.

This system provides timely information about risk behaviour and HIV test outcomes. This improves our understanding of the populations at high risk, enables timely responses to changes in the HIV epidemic to be developed, and the impact of interventions to reduce HIV transmission (such as education and prevention campaigns) to be evaluated.

The success of this project has been instrumental in the Department of Human Services providing funding for the development of linked sentinel surveillance systems for HIV, hepatitis C and chlamydia at 15 sentinel sites in Victoria commencing in late 2005.

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