

# Press Release

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From the Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women's Health and the Canadian Women's Health Network:

## Studies Highlight Differences in HIV Risks For Canadian Men and Women

New studies published by the Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women's Health (ACEWH) reveal that there has been an overall lack of sensitivity to the differences in risk factors between men and women in HIV prevention and treatment strategies in Canada, and that these omissions have profound implications for the health of all Canadians.

Health Canada estimates that 1 in 500 Canadians has been infected with the HIV virus, with 35,000 currently diagnosed cases of HIV/AIDS and an estimated 15,000 more who are unaware of their infection (Health Canada 2000).

In Canada, the number of women being diagnosed with HIV continues to increase. While there has been an overall drop of 25% in the number of new HIV positive infections in Canada since 1995, the current female infection rate has risen steadily, and has increased by 20% since 1997. Globally, women are becoming infected at younger ages than men, and transmission from men to women is twice as likely as from women to men.

### **Individual studies published by ACEWH examine the impact of HIV on diverse female populations in Canada:**

- **HIV and Aboriginal Women**

There have been dramatic and rapid increases in HIV and AIDS rates among Aboriginal peoples in Canada with the patterns of HIV and AIDS cases markedly different from that observed for Canadian women in general. Epidemiological data shows that Aboriginal women constituted 49.6% of newly diagnosed HIV cases among Aboriginal people, while non-Aboriginal women comprise 20% of newly diagnosed non-Aboriginal HIV cases.

Injection drug use is the major mode of HIV transmission among Aboriginal women, followed by heterosexual contact with an HIV infected partner. HIV infection occurs at a younger age for Aboriginal women than for non-Aboriginal women. Young women

constitute the largest proportion of Aboriginal AIDS cases. Consequently, the risk of HIV transmission from mother to infant among Aboriginal women is on the rise. The ACEWH published study indicates that despite these alarming trends, Aboriginal women continue to remain invisible in HIV/AIDS research and policy, and they face numerous barriers in accessing services.

- **HIV and Pregnant Women**

Women of childbearing age (15-44 years) account for approximately 80% of total AIDS cases among adult women in Canada. Of pediatric AIDS cases, the majority (84%) can be attributed to mother-to-child transmission (Health Canada 2001). This national study examines the application and acceptability of the different Provincial approaches of providing voluntary HIV testing and counseling to reduce the rate of pediatric AIDS in Canada.

- **HIV and Injection Drug Use**

Injection drug use continues to be a major contributing risk amongst women testing positive in Canada. The proportion of positive HIV tests among women attributable to injection drug use was 31.9% prior to 1994, rising to 53.6% in 1995, and 47.5% in 1999.

The authors of the ACEWH published study suggest that women who use injection drugs are more likely than men to use needles and syringes previously used by others, more likely to share other injection materials (water, cotton, cookers), and are more likely to report sharing of needles and syringes with a sex partner. Study findings suggest the importance of relationships and networks in HIV risk for female injection drug use.

- **HIV and Prostitution**

Contrary to popular stereotypes, studies show that Canadian female prostitutes are no more likely to be infected with HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases than other women unless they are also injection drug users. To date, the focus of much HIV prevention work within the sex trade industry in the Canadian context has been on the female prostitute. Most prevention programs have attempted to ensure that female prostitutes have a high level of knowledge of HIV transmission and utilize condoms. Studies suggest that these programs have been effective, and that many women who work as prostitutes within the North American context are relatively consistent users of condoms, and that sex-trade workers use condoms more consistently than other populations similar in age, race and sex.

However, research also indicates that when condoms are not utilized during the prostitute-client relationship, it is frequently because the client resists. Client resistance to condom use can take many different forms, from subtle coercion to more overt forms of violence. This study demonstrates that the emphasis on the female prostitute as the keeper of safer sex not only detracts attention from the contexts that make it difficult for

the women to practice safer sex, but also reinforces the idea that the women, and not the men, are to blame if one or more parties becomes HIV infected.

**Other studies include:**

**\*HIV and Poverty**

**\*HIV and Adolescent Health**

**\*HIV and Marginalized Communities**

For more details on study results and to arrange interviews with the individual study authors, please contact:

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