Ontario joins ranks with 7 other provinces and territories last month when it announced a program of universal prenatal HIV counselling and voluntary testing. The announcement was made on World AIDS Day, Dec. 1. However, some experts are concerned that the province has made little effort to inform doctors about the tests, which can be done only with a pregnant woman’s informed consent.

“Doctors who have never really thought about HIV often know very little about it, and are uncomfortable — we’ve seen this a lot,” says Dr. Susan King, a pediatrician and infectious disease specialist at Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children. She thinks it will take obstetricians in some communities “quite a while to become comfortable” enough to discuss the tests with patients. An information package of brochures for patients and guidelines for doctors was not available when Health Minister Elizabeth Witmer announced the program.

British Columbia, the first province to act, launched its program in 1994, and King is pleased that Ontario has finally taken the same step. “We’re still picking up kids who were infected as infants. We just had a 3-year-old referred to us. If we’d had a program in ’95, that might have been prevented.”

Ontario’s standard prenatal laboratory test forms are being revised to include the HIV test and doctors will be required to tick a box indicating that pretest counselling was done. If a test is ordered, a second box specifying that informed consent was obtained must also be ticked.

The province expects that about 150 000 prenatal HIV tests — roughly equal to the number of expected births — will be performed annually at a cost of about $775 000. Previously, only about 12% of pregnant women were tested for HIV in Ontario. King says the provincial program will encourage women to get tested.

“You have 9 months to think about it,” she says. "We’re trying to change the perception that this is just for the last month of pregnancy. It’s really about the first month."

Ontario’s effort is part of a movement to provide universal prenatal HIV counselling and testing. As of January 1, 1999, all provinces and territories except Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia and the Northwest Territories have announced plans to provide such services. The Northwest Territories is expected to follow suit soon.

Dr. Brian O’Connor, the foundation president and medical health officer for Vancouver’s North Shore, hopes the trail markers will encourage people to get exercise on what he calls “one of the most beautiful walking routes in Canada.” The scenery may well distract walkers from their sore feet. The 10-km walk begins in the forests and mountains of the Capilano River regional park and ends on the West Vancouver seawall with its expansive view.

The use of the pathways is already being evaluated in Ireland. In West Vancouver, the Angus Reid group is polling North Shore residents to determine the trail’s success. — © Heather Kent