

STD clinic worried after accuracy of rapid HIV test challenged

There is anxiety at Canada's busiest site for anonymous HIV testing because only 400 of 1900 people returned for retesting after taking a rapid HIV test that has produced false-negative results (see letter, page 119). Results for 1 returnee, who tested negative on the rapid test, came back positive after standard testing.

"We issued a press release asking for everyone to return for retesting and we keep running ads in gay papers and elsewhere," says Jane Greer, director of the Hassle Free Clinic located in the heart of Toronto's gay village. "But the message hasn't been getting through."

At issue are 2 "Fast-Check" HIV tests that were licensed by Health Canada in March 2000 (see Health and Drug Alert, page 170). Their accuracy was challenged by the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control in March 2002 (see letter, page 119). On Apr. 29, Health Canada announced that the manufacturer, BioChem ImmunoSystems, had agreed to halt all sales until further investigations were completed.

Greer says that's little consolation for her clinic, which is funded by the city of Toronto and saw 22 000 patients last year. It is one of the busiest testing sites for sexually transmitted disease in Canada.

She said the "point-of-care" rapid test had proved hugely popular since the Hassle Free Clinic started providing it in November 2001. The clinic was able to buy the tests, which usually sell for about \$15, for \$5.61. "It offered convenience and peace of mind, with results available in 15 minutes instead of a week and a half. Ninety percent of our clients chose it over the standard [enzyme immunoassay and Western blot] tests."

The convenience was a major selling point for a clinic that attracts many transients because it offers free, anonymous testing and requires no health card. The clinic draws people from across both the province and the multicultural spectrum — a total of 47 different first languages have been recorded among its clients.

Although Greer does not criticize how Health Canada and the manufacturer ini-

tially responded to the BC findings, she said both "had dropped the ball" over publicizing concerns about false-negative results. "They left that up to us," she said.

— *Patrick Sullivan, CMAJ*

Down's syndrome focus of new BC facility

Scientists at the new \$3.5-million Down Syndrome (DS) Research Foundation and Resource Centre in Burnaby, BC, will be attempting to determine how young people with the syndrome acquire skills and learn. "We now have a focal point for looking into DS research and education," says Josephine Mills, executive director of the facility, which is drawing researchers from 3 BC universities.

"There are a few clinics in other parts of the world, but this is the only centre driven by both the community and science," says kinesiologist Dan Weeks of Simon Fraser University (SFU), who has been conducting research into DS for more than 15 years.

DS affects 1 in 900 babies and is the largest single cause of developmental delays in Canadian children. "In many respects it is the most neglected," says Mills. "Now we can educate the educators and the families."

The facility, which is developing a pamphlet for health care professionals, encourages children and young adults with DS to attend educational programs and services and take part in research projects. It is funded by the province and private donors, and will also host summer courses, including a computer camp for children with DS.

Mills, who started the Canadian Down Syndrome Society, says young adults with DS are auditing university courses in Alberta. "They do really well with just a little support. It is becoming realistic for them to aim at participating in university programs."

"It is my dream to see an individual with Down syndrome graduate from SFU," says Weeks. — *Anne Tempelman-Kluit, Vancouver*

Kyoto ratification appears unstoppable despite holdouts

Although the US, Australia and Canada are showing increasing reluctance to embrace it, it appears likely the Kyoto Protocol will be ratified anyway. The treaty, designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, must be ratified by at least 55 of the 100 countries that helped draft it, and those 55 must have been responsible for at least 55% of the world's emissions in 1990. Japan and the European Union ratified the treaty in June, and Russia and Poland have committed to doing so later this year. This means that Canada, Australia and the US aren't needed to bring it into force. The 1997 protocol calls for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions to 6% below 1990 levels by 2012.

Canada is still discussing ratification, but headlines claiming that the treaty will cost \$40 billion and thousands of jobs have alarmed many people, including politicians. Per capita, Canada is the second-largest greenhouse-gas producer within the Group of Eight.

The US government, meanwhile, has called for more research. In a June study by the Environmental Protection Agency, the US finally conceded that humans are mostly to blame for recent global warming and that climate change will have far-reaching effects on the environment. Despite this, the US government is sticking to its policy of voluntary measures that would still allow gas emissions to increase. The US now produces 25% of the world's greenhouse gases.

The *US Climate Action Report 2002* (www.epa.gov/globalwarming/publications/car/), submitted to the UN, details the far-reaching effects of global warming, which include the "very likely" disruption of snow-fed water supplies, more stifling heat waves and the permanent disappearance of Rocky Mountain meadows and coastal marshes. It concludes that even if steps are taken to cut emissions, nothing can be done about the environmental consequences of several decades worth of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases that have already been released into the atmosphere. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*