Home HIV test would relieve silent suffering

BY RALPH R. FERRICHS

Is my sexual partner likely to be infected with HIV? This question haunts many who seek love and long life from the same relationship. Of course, blood tests are available at HIV clinics or in most hospitals and physician offices, yet many people are hesitant to seek such testing.

If HIV was a chronic disease affecting only the infected individual, the avoidance of testing might be viewed as "infected rights." Yet the avoidance of HIV diagnosis extends beyond as the virus moves silently from one unsuspecting person to another. Transmission can easily be stopped, but only if people know their sexual partner is infected. Otherwise they must rely on continued - sometimes imperfect - condom use or avoid having intercourse with lovers who refuse to wear condoms.

Recognizing the powerful forces of sexuality and the limitations of condoms, it is no wonder that the concept of home HIV testing is appealing to many. Saliva or blood from a finger prick can be collected at home and sent anonymously to a central laboratory for analysis, with results — and follow-up advice — obtained over the phone.

The vast majority of Americans would likely screen negative, creating a sense of relief for themselves and their sexual partners. Some, however, would screen positive and would be encouraged to enter the health-care system. In this way, the process of home HIV testing would be similar to other screening procedures: self-examination for breast cancer; blood-pressure tests or cholesterol measuring kits. In each instance, positive findings stimulate the individual to seek further care. Most people who screen positive manage to cope with their fears, accept the preliminary knowledge and enter the health-care system for help. The same should take place with HIV.

While many contend that HIV is different from other diseases and that people cannot deal with such initial knowledge without the assistance of a trained counselor in a clinical setting, there has been no research to substantiate these claims on the impact of home HIV tests with only telephone counseling. Instead, social and political concern rather than scientific fact has kept home tests from becoming available.

There are three major public-health reasons for offering home HIV tests: Such testing will help end the silent nature of the epidemic, forcing society to recognize people with HIV as individuals and learn to understand the nature of their infection; easily available tests will lead to earlier recognition of infection, helping HIV-infected persons ward off death and avoid further transmission; and home HIV tests will empower people to recognize that HIV is caused by a preventable virus and not by the mysterious and intense draw of sexual or addictive behavior.

Once public-health leaders, social activists and medical professionals understand the benefits of home HIV testing, the many inexpensive home tests now cited in literature should become readily available in the marketplace.

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