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California Department of Public Health



GAVIN NEWSOM
Governor

May 27, 2020

Subject: HIV/HCV/STD testing during the COVID-19 pandemic

Dear Colleague,

As we all continue to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, the California Department of Public Health, Office of AIDS (CDPH/OA) and STD Control Branch (STD CB) remain committed to work with you to help ensure the health and safety of the communities we serve. In our communities, many of the same people and organizations that are working to end the HIV, hepatitis C virus (HCV), and sexually transmitted disease (STD) epidemics are playing integral roles in protecting vulnerable populations from COVID-19. While many clinics have been able to transition HIV/HCV/STD and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) care to telemedicine, providing HIV/HCV/STD testing and linkage to care for people newly diagnosed with HIV/HCV/STD has been more challenging. The COVID-19 pandemic has altered how people at risk for HIV/HCV/STD access prevention services and creative solutions are needed.

One opportunity is to expand routine HIV/HCV/Syphilis testing when people seek in-person care in emergency departments and urgent care clinics. Routine HIV testing is already recommended for all patients from 15 – 65 years of age who seek medical care in these settings and routine HCV testing is now recommended for people > 18 years of age. Adding an HIV/HCV/Syphilis test to testing that is already being done alleviates the need for another in-person blood draw. In addition, HIV testing should be considered in any hospitalized patient with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 infection as immunosuppression is a risk for severe COVID-19 illness. Acute HIV infection should also be considered in the differential diagnosis for patients who present with fever or other symptoms of a non-specific viral illness.

Another opportunity for healthcare organizations is to expand the use of self-testing and home specimen collection for HIV/HCV/STD testing when in-person testing options become limited. An FDA-approved home HIV test is commercially available and allows people to perform an HIV test on oral fluid at home. Home specimen collection kits are also available for HIV/HCV/STD testing (including three site testing for chlamydia and gonorrhea) and are covered by some insurance plans when ordered by a clinician. Specimen kits are mailed to the patient's home and contain supplies to collect blood from a fingerstick or other appropriate method (e.g. self-collected swabs and urine for

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Dear Colleague
May 27, 2020
Page 2

three site testing). The kit is then mailed back to the lab which performs the testing and returns results to the clinician.

Although providing access to HIV/HCV/STD testing has become more challenging, the benefits of knowing one's status and initiating early treatment continue. Indeed, if untreated HIV infection increases the risk of more severe COVID-19, then the benefits of testing and treatment initiation are greater than ever. OA and STD CB remain committed to moving forward with efforts to end the HIV/HCV/STD epidemic while considering the needs of the communities and individuals at risk for COVID-19 in every decision.

Sincerely,

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