HIV Diagnoses Continue to Plummet at Major London Sexual Health Clinic

A push to diagnose and rapidly treat HIV and other STIs as well as use of Truvada as PrEP are likely driving the trend.

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The rate of new HIV diagnoses at London's largest sexual health clinic has plummeted by 40 percent two years running, for a cumulative reduction of two thirds since 2015, the Evening Standard reports. Given such an exciting and relatively sudden downward trend, administrators at the 56 Dean Street clinic, located in the gay neighborhood of Soho, have just set a new, ambitious target of hitting zero diagnoses within five years.

The Dean Street clinic typically diagnoses about one in nine cases of HIV annually in the United Kingdom. The clinic has been on the vanguard of combating the spread of HIV by instigating aggressive policies to improve the diagnosis and rapid treatment of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and to provide monitoring for people who purchase Truvada (tenofovir disoproxil fumarate/emtricitabine) as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) online.

In this effort, the minds behind Dean Street have borrowed policies, procedures and even architecture from San Francisco in particular. The open and inviting street-level clinic bears intentional similarities to the Californian city's Strut clinic, which is located on Castro Street, also in the heart of a gay mecca.

The 56 Dean Street clinic in LondonBenjamin Ryan

Steve Gibson, Pierre-Cédric Crouch and Jayne Gagliano of San Francisco's StrutBenjamin Ryan

Starting in September, PrEP will become available through England's National Health Service for the first time. The NHS will launch a three-year study, providing the HIV prevention pill to at least 10,000 people, spending 10 million pounds in the process.

In the meantime, thousands of men who have sex with men (MSM) in London have purchased PrEP on the internet. Many of them rely on the Dean Street clinic for the routine medical monitoring that is recommended as part of a PrEP prescription. The PROUD study of PrEP also recently ran in the United Kingdom, providing Truvada to hundreds of high-risk MSM in the process. The study found that giving PrEP to these men reduced their overall HIV rate by 86 percent.

Between January and July of this year, the Dean Street clinic diagnosed 136 people with HIV. At this rate, the clinic will wind up diagnosing 233 people with the virus by the end of the year. This would represent a 40 percent drop in the annual rate since 2016, when there were 393 diagnoses, and a 66 percent drop since 2015, when 679 people were diagnosed.

According to Public Health England, HIV diagnoses in London declined steadily between 2006 and 2015, from more than 3,000 to 2,603 diagnoses. MSM make up the majority of new diagnoses. An estimated one in seven MSM in the city are living with the virus.

The Dean Street clinic just announced a Plan Zero initiative to drive down diagnoses even further by pushing HIV prevention efforts among a harder-to-reach population of MSM.

To read the Evening Standard article, click here.

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