Why HIV Rates Dropped 71% Among Gay and Bi Men in the U.K.

It’s not just because of PrEP, which isn’t even easily available in England.

January 21, 2020 By Trent Straube

Here’s some great HIV news from across the pond: New HIV infections among gay and bisexual men in the United Kingdom dropped 71% since 2012, and the nation is on track to end HIV transmission by 2030, reports BBC.com. The United Kingdom consists of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

HIV data for 2018 from Public Health England show other promising signs, notably in terms of the HIV care continuum, also known as the treatment cascade. Of the 103,800 people estimated to be living with the virus in the United Kingdom, 93% have been diagnosed; of those, 97% are receiving treatment; and of those, 97% are undetectable, meaning not only that they are healthier but also that they cannot transmit the virus sexually, even during condomless sex (a fact referred to as Undetectable Equals Untransmittable, or U=U).

What’s more, the number of new HIV cases among gay and bisexual men plummeted from 2,800 in 2012 to 800 in 2018. The number of men who have sex with living with undiagnosed HIV dropped 50% between 2014 and 2018, to 3,600, thanks to an increase in HIV testing.

The advent of PrEP, or pre-exposure prophylaxis, the daily pill for HIV-negative people at risk of contracting the virus, deserves some credit for the drop in new cases. PrEP is over 99% effective among men who have sex with men when taken as directed.

Although PrEP is available for people deemed at risk for HIV in Scotland and Wales, it is not readily accessible in England. In order to get PrEP in England, individuals must be enrolled in the PrEP Impact Trial via local clinics, many of which have waiting lists. In fact, since October 2019, at least 15 people on a waiting list for the trial have tested HIV positive. As a result, advocates have been pressuring England’s health care service to start funding PrEP.

In other discerning news, AIDS service organization the Terrence Higgins Trust says 43% of new diagnoses are among people—especially heterosexual men and people older than 50—in a late stage of infection,.

For other recent news from the United Kingdom, see “British Pilot With HIV Fights Employment

Discrimination—and Wins!” and “Gay ‘Chemsex’ Parties Pose Challenges to European HIV Efforts.”

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