US agency recommends opportunistic HIV testing

Bob Roehr *Washington, DC*

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has issued new recommendations designed to make voluntary HIV screening, on an opportunistic basis, a routine part of medical care for all patients aged 13 to 64 years.

The changes, published last week, have been discussed for more than three years (*BMJ* 2006;332:1169).

The objective is to increase early diagnosis among the estimated 250 000 Americans who are HIV positive but are not aware of their infection. The recommendations should reduce the paperwork burden of obtaining special consent to conduct a test for HIV infection.

They apply only to health-care settings. They do not apply to non-clinical outreach programmes or community centres.

The main recommendations are:

- All patients should be screened for HIV, regardless of whether they seem to be at risk
- Patients should be able to voluntarily opt out of screening
- The need for special consent for such tests should be eliminated and be replaced by a standard requirement for consent
- Counselling on HIV before and after the test is advisable but not mandatory.

"Our goal is to ensure that everyone who receives medical care also has the opportunity to learn if they are infected with HIV," said Kevin Fenton, director of the CDC's National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention. "Making the HIV

test a normal part of care for all Americans is also an important step toward removing the stigma still associated with testing."

The American Academy of HIV Medicine endorsed the new guidelines but expressed "concerns about successful linkages into medical care and prevention services for the newly diagnosed, patient privacy, informed consent, and funding to support both increased testing and care."

Michael Saag, director of the HIV clinic at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, said, "Patients who get treatment while they're still healthy live longer than those who get it when they're already sick. Only those people who start with a CD4 count above 200 [$\times 10^6/l$] are gaining the full benefit [of the drugs]."

Three quarters of patients have a CD4 T cell count of less than $200 \times 10^6/l$ when they first appear at Dr Saag's clinic. "The one exception is pregnant women; their median CD4 count is 400." That is because state law has long required that testing for HIV, with an opt-out choice, be offered to all pregnant women as part of standard medical care.

The National Association of People with AIDS supports more voluntary testing for HIV. It notes that people who elect to be tested seem to be more actively engaged in their own health care.

It offered guarded support for the changes.

The revised recommendations are at www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5514a1.htm.

UK chancellor proposes independent board to run NHS

Adrian O'Dowd *London*

An independent board responsible for the day to day running of the health service has been proposed by the UK's chancellor of the exchequer, Gordon Brown, as a way of defusing political disputes over its performance.

The idea, to "depoliticise" the NHS, is being compared to the government's decision to hand responsibility for interest rates to the Bank of England. It is being widely discussed by NHS leaders because of the strong possibility that Mr Brown will succeed Tony Blair as the United Kingdom's next prime minister.

Mr Brown, addressing this week's Labour party conference in Manchester, said, "The purpose of independence for the Bank of England was to devolve power

and separate the making of public policy from the independent administration of daily business.

"And I believe we must now examine how elsewhere we can separate the decisions that, in a democracy, elected politicians must make from the business of day to day administration."

Mr Brown is understood to have asked experts to explore the possibility of an independent board to run the NHS, with health ministers setting only the budget and strategic objectives.

Doctors' leaders are sceptical, and the BMA's chairman, James Johnson, said, "The controversial aspect of the health service at the moment is the strategic direction, not the detail. If you hand the detail over to some-

Gordon Brown said it was necessary to separate the decisions that politicians make from day to day administration of the NHS

body else but leave the strategy with politicians, it will do nothing to remove the current criticisms of the direction in which the government is taking the NHS. It is the strategy which needs to be at arm's length."

Mr Brown's idea is similar to a plan, due to be announced at the conference, to create a con-

stitution for the NHS similar to the BBC charter.

The health minister Andy Burnham, writing on the website of Progress, the independent organisation for Labour party members, said that there should be fewer targets, local decision making, and more operational independence for the NHS.