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Dear <President of College/Faculty>

Tackling undiagnosed HIV infection

Audit evidence has clearly demonstrated that opportunities for earlier diagnosis of HIV are being missed in both primary and secondary care. The vast majority of patients who present late have had multiple contacts with healthcare professionals who, if they were aware of the latest information on HIV, including common presenting conditions, could have made the diagnosis much earlier. Patients experience additional morbidity and are at risk of dying prematurely because HIV is not diagnosed and they are not offered appropriate treatment.

Undiagnosed HIV infection remains a significant public health issue in the UK, with around 20,000 of the estimated 77,400 people living with HIV at the end of 2007 unaware of their infection. Late diagnosis, defined as presenting with an AIDS-defining condition or a low CD4 cell count, prevents individuals from receiving appropriate treatment and care and increases the risk of onward transmission to others.

Following my letter to all medical practitioners in 2007, I would welcome your feedback on what action you have taken already to promote engagement of your members and fellows in identifying cases of HIV infection. In particular, do the policies and guidelines issued to members and fellows of your College specifically address HIV testing among patients attending your services and, are the recommendations on HIV testing (see Annex) covered in the courses and training offered by the College?

While data on the frequency of HIV in patients presenting with a range of diseases is unknown, the prevalence in many is above the 0.1% level at which routine testing is assumed to be cost effective.

Last year, two helpful resources were published aimed at reducing undiagnosed HIV: new guidelines for HIV testing, together with a practical guide, funded by the Department of Health for healthcare professionals in secondary care, to support improved detection and diagnosis of HIV in the UK. In addition, the Department is currently funding a number of pilot projects to evaluate the feasibility and acceptability of routine HIV testing in additional healthcare settings, including Accident and Emergency, Acute Medical Admissions and new GP registrants. A project co-ordinated by the Medical Foundation for AIDS and Sexual Health is also seeking to engage with relevant groups of healthcare professionals, suggesting opportunities and resources (such as slide sets and lecturers) for educating their members about HIV and HIV testing.

I would welcome suggestions for how to improve the current situation and your feedback on what, specifically, are the barriers to testing among your members. We must maximise opportunities to share initiatives and good practice.

Tackling HIV cannot be left to the specialists alone. The introduction of effective treatments has transformed HIV services and health outcomes and today most people are living with HIV as a chronic long-term condition. However, HIV remains a serious and often stigmatised health condition that may deter individuals from actively seeking or being offered an HIV test. Yet there are clear public health and individual benefits for people knowing their HIV status, especially if they face an increased risk of HIV, or are a partner of a person at increased risk.

I look forward to hearing of any action or initiatives that your College is taking to reduce undiagnosed HIV infection.

Yours sincerely



SIR LIAM DONALDSON, CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER

Enc: HIV for non-HIV specialists

Annex: Recommendations for testing (extracted from reference [3])

(MedFASH note: for Annex see sections 4.1 to 4.3 of the UK national guidelines for HIV testing 2008 including the table of clinical indicator conditions.)

¹ Health Protection Agency. *HIV in the United Kingdom: 2008 Report*.

Available from: http://www.hpa.org.uk/web/HPAweb&HPAwebStandard/HPAweb_C/1227515299695

² *Improving the detection and diagnosis of HIV in non-HIV specialties including primary care*.

Available from: <https://www.cas.dh.gov.uk/ViewandAcknowledgment/ViewAlert.aspx?AlertID=100818>

³ BHIVA, BASHH, BIS. *UK national guidelines for HIV testing 2008*. Available from: <http://www.bhiva.org/files/file1031097.pdf>

⁴ Baggaley R. *HIV for non-HIV specialists*. Medical Foundation for AIDS and Sexual Health, 2008. Available from: <http://www.medfash.org.uk>