

Smart data can help us achieve our health goals

Written by David Brinkman Special to The Desert Sun
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As CROI 2013 — the 20th Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections — met in Atlanta earlier this month, it brought exciting news stories and headlines such as “Functional HIV cure in a child” and “New HIV drugs show promise.”

For those of us at Desert AIDS Project who weren’t able to be at CROI, the conference webcasts, Twitter feeds of attendees and clinical discussions in the blogosphere made us feel almost as if we were. But these like-you-were-there sources also brought less encouraging stories, such as “HIV linked to higher chance of heart attack” ... “Black gay men run higher risk of HIV infection despite fewer partners” ... and “HIV ‘cure’ at risk from budget funds.”

CROI and similar conferences are keys to bringing medical research updates to clinical and support staff at Desert AIDS Project, which is providing essential, daily care to those living with HIV or AIDS. The data and information reported at these conferences also help to continue drawing that road map we all seek for stopping HIV infection, so that we can move forward to the promise of the AIDS-free generation that former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke of in November 2011 when she addressed the National Institutes of Health.

Now in the fourth decade of this worldwide epidemic, we at the Desert AIDS Project are hopeful for that future when the world is free of AIDS — and we believe strongly in the bumper-sticker philosophy of “think globally, act locally” in making that future become a reality. Current community health statistics, such as those provided by the Health Assessment Resource Center (HARC) are important to health care providers like Desert AIDS Project. If we are to continue getting ahead of the curve and moving forward to a vaccine against HIV or a cure for AIDS, data about how our own community is affected by HIV/AIDS, as well as a host of other health concerns, is essential.

We believe that the best contribution we can make to solving this global problem is by dealing with HIV prevention and access to medical care right here in our collective backyard. Because people who begin taking the correct medications soon after being infected with HIV are 96 percent less likely to spread the virus to others, it’s essential for Desert AIDS Project to link those in our community who are newly infected to HIV/AIDS care.

That’s why we have asked our clients, volunteers, donors and staff to help out HARC — and other community health care providers such as Desert AIDS Project — by participating in the phone survey HARC is conducting, in cooperation with Kent State University. The survey will provide crucial data for programs that bring necessary services to our community, such as feeding homebound seniors, making counseling available for school children, and offering free and confidential HIV testing.

A wide variety of local organizations use the HARC survey findings, including nonprofit organizations, county and city governments, universities, hospitals and private businesses. This data help obtain grant funding, develop targeted programs and prioritize health needs in the community. In fact, local organizations that cited HARC data in their funding requests have received more than \$4.7 million to fund local programs in the Coachella Valley. For more information on HARC or the survey, visit HARCdata.org or call (760) 404-1945.

Armed with current, local health data, Desert AIDS Project is positioned to play a role in what we hope will be the final chapter of this devastating epidemic. Quite simply, if we can link everyone who has the virus to proper medication and medical care, we can stop the spread of HIV locally and be a part of bringing an end to AIDS.

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