

Faster HIV tests at more places

But should patient anonymity also be extended to more clinics?

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IT WILL soon be more convenient to get tested for HIV because rapid-test kits are likely to be available at more clinics.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) told TODAY it is planning to allow the use of such kits – which take only 20 minutes, instead of the usual one to three days, to get a result – at more clinics.

Currently, HIV testing is not allowed at clinics – except three (see box) involved in a pilot anonymous testing programme that use the rapid-test kits.

Conventional HIV blood tests can be done only at hospitals and processed by approved laboratories. If the results are positive, the authorities must be notified and the patient's sexual partners informed.

But while the rapid test, which costs about \$50, may be offered at more clinics, anonymity will continue to be available only at the three designated sites.

The ministry noted that voluntary anonymous testing is gaining more acceptance here. "We are encouraged that more people have been coming forward for HIV testing at these clinics," said a spokesperson.

Results from a recent survey, conducted by two general practitioners involved in the anonymous testing programme, offer insight into why this form of testing works.

Of 678 people who took the test, 8 were HIV-positive. That



WHERE TO GET TESTED ANONYMOUSLY

RAPID ORAL SWAB TEST (SALIVA)

Anteh Dispensary Family Clinic & Surgery
368 Geylang Road
Tel: 6744 1809

Cambridge Clinic
Block 333,
Kreta Ayer Road, #03-27
Tel: 6327 1252

RAPID FINGER-PRICK TEST (BLOOD)

Action for Aids
Anonymous HIV testing and Counselling Clinic
DSC Clinic
31 Kelantan Lane, #01-16
Tue & Wed: 6.30pm to 8pm
Sat: 1.30pm to 3.30pm
(except public holidays)
Tel: 6254 0212

is a higher incidence rate than the 1-in-350 in MOH's recent random sampling of some 3,000 anonymous blood samples.

The survey also found that most of those who tested anonymously were unmarried heterosexual Chinese men

under 40, who fits the national profile of a high-risk group, said Dr Tan Sze Wee, CEO of Rockeby Biomed, which supplies rapid-test HIV saliva kits.

The incidence rate of HIV-positive results "shows that anonymous testing has been successful at attracting a high-risk group", he added.

The biggest barrier to voluntary HIV testing is that doctors in Singapore have to inform the ministry if a patient is HIV positive. HIV testing is mandatory only for pregnant women and foreigners applying for work permits.

"If we think about which situation we are better off with – continue not testing at all, or test anonymously with the hope that these people take responsibility for the results – it is better to test," said Dr Chua Thiam Eng, a general practitioner at Cambridge Clinic. There is no guarantee a person who tests positive will tell their partners, but "the fact that these people get tested in the first place points to a level of personal responsibility", he added.

Three of his patients, who tested HIV-positive, all sought medical treatment overseas, as they were not willing to inform the local authorities.

But any extension of testing programmes – anonymous or otherwise – must be matched by strong support mechanisms, such as comprehensive counselling, said Action for Aids (Afa) executive director Lionel Lee.

Testing sites already do pre- and post-test counselling.

"It is Afa's policy to counsel those who test positive to go into the system (by informing the Communicable Disease Centre), as this gives them better access to treatment and support," Mr Lee said.

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OLD FRIENDS: Mr Lee Kuan Yew at former Indonesian President Suharto's house in Jakarta yesterday.

This 'punching bag' will bounce back: MM

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breathing space. We need to have our obligations honoured."

Mr Lee stressed that the deal must be honoured. "Otherwise, every time you want to get something from us you would say – if you don't do this, I'll do that."

Mr Lee also explained that the Indonesian government had cancelled Singapore's military training arrangements in Indonesia. Jakarta also stopped exporting sand to get the Extradition Treaty with Singapore backdated by 15 years.

On the Extradition Treaty, the Minister Mentor said that Singapore's fund industry would not go into a steep decline if Indonesia were to pull out the money allegedly being hidden in Singapore.

He clarified that only about 3 per cent, or US\$30 billion (\$45 billion), of the

US\$890-billion foreign fund managed in Singapore, is from Indonesia.

Apart from his appearance at the forum, Mr Lee, accompanied by Mrs Lee on a six-day trip to Jakarta, also took time out to see two former Indonesian heads of state yesterday.

The first stop was a private visit to Mr Suharto at his home in Jakarta. The former President, who stepped down in 1998, appeared to be in good health, spending half an hour with the Lees before sending them off. The two men last met during Mr Lee's visit to Indonesia last year.

The Minister Mentor also met another former President, Ms Megawati Sukarnoputri, at her residence.

According to Ms Megawati, who is expected to run again in the next presidential election, Indonesia's political situation was among the topics discussed during their 30-minute meeting. — CHANNEL NEWSASIA

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