

Researchers in state praised for HIV work

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Even as Connecticut considers reducing funding for AIDS programs, state public health researchers are winning accolades for their work with those living with HIV.

A program developed at the University of Connecticut's Center for Health, Intervention and Prevention is among a group of eight intervention programs commended recently by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Under the program, known as "Options," clinicians are trained to counsel HIV-positive patients during routine medical appointments to avoid risky behavior, such as unprotected sex and drug use, developing a list of behavioral prescriptions for patients to follow as they live with the virus.

"Most interventions focus on people not infected with HIV and not likely to become infected," said Jeffrey D. Fisher, a social psychology professor at UConn and director of the intervention center. "But we also need to help people who have HIV to practice safer sex and drug use."

Such precautions are necessary not just to protect the health of those living with HIV or AIDS, which make patients substantially more susceptible to infection and disease, but also to ensure that continued risky behavior doesn't spread HIV to those with whom diagnosed people share needles or have sex.

Fisher developed the program in the late 1990s with his brother, Bill Fisher, a professor at the University of Western Ontario, and three other researchers from CHIP and Yale University.

The Options program was developed from current behavioral theory and a process of collaboration with those struggling with HIV diagnosis and problems with substance abuse or risky sex, Fisher said. The intervention plan asks clinical workers to work with patients to develop strategies for reducing risk, and to evaluate each patient's willingness to change.

The program was included this year in "The 2008 Compendium of Evidence-based HIV Prevention Interventions," which is compiled annually by the CDC, and recognizes programs that have proven successful at reducing HIV infection and behavior that can increase the chance of contracting sexually transmitted diseases.

The CDC estimates that 46,000 people were infected with HIV in the U.S. in 2006, the most recent year for which data was available.

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