

Community statement on the START trial and the change in the US DHHS treatment guidelines

INSIGHT Community Advisory Board

Introduction

The following statement is produced in response to a change in the US treatment guidelines in December 2009 that stated that antiretroviral (ARV) treatment should be universally started at any CD4 count below 500 cells/mm³.

The START study is currently enrolling patients to look at whether there is evidence to support such a recommendation. Currently no randomised trial has provided data on the advantages and risks of earlier treatment. This statement affirms both the importance of the START trial and the safety for people who enrol.

We believe that the priority for HIV-positive people is to have accurate, reliable data on both the risks and benefits of earlier treatment in order to base any decision for when to start treatment.

We fully support this study and invite other individuals and community organisations to endorse the importance of this research. Endorsements can be sent to endorsestart@gmail.com.

Statement

When to start antiretroviral treatment is one of the most important outstanding questions for people with HIV and their clinicians. A large clinical trial, Strategic Timing of Antiretroviral Treatment (START), has begun and will hopefully help answer this and other important questions. [1]

The START trial includes antiretroviral-naïve HIV-positive people with CD4 counts greater than 500 cells/mm³. It is taking place at about 90 sites in nearly 30 countries. Participants are randomised to either receive antiretroviral treatment immediately or to defer treatment until their first CD4 count less than 350 cells/mm³ or they have clinical signs of AIDS. Eventually, START will recruit 4,000 people.

The deferred arm is the current standard of care throughout the world, with guidelines recommending treatment at a CD4 count of 350 cells/mm³. Clinical trials have demonstrated that once the CD4 count drops to below 350 cells/mm³, antiretroviral treatment should begin. [2, 3] However, the recent US guideline change requires a community response for US patients who still want to take part in this study.

On 1 December 2009, the United States (US) Guidelines for the Use of Antiretroviral Agents in HIV-1-Infected Adults and Adolescents were changed to recommend treatment for patients with CD4 counts between 350 and 500 cells/mm³. Of the more than two-thirds of Panel members who supported this recommendation, 55% recommended it strongly and 45% moderately. As explained in the guidelines, this recommendation is based solely on observational data primarily from two large cohorts known as ART CC and NA-ACCORD. As with all observational data the findings from these cohorts could be subject to confounding factors. [4]

Indeed, the ART CC investigators have stated, “We are concerned that some may interpret the new [US] recommendations as implying that the deferral group of this trial is no longer ethical. Such an interpretation would endanger the future of the trial in the [US].” [5]

They further state, “We ... do not believe that there is convincing evidence to conclude that deferral

of initiation of ART to a CD4 count of [350 cells/mm³] causes net harm, particularly in terms of mortality, compared with starting at any higher level. We strongly support continued enrolment into START. Large randomised studies represent the only means of eventually obtaining the definitive result we need to properly inform future patient care.

We agree with the ART CC investigators. The available evidence is insufficient to determine if the adherence challenges and long-term side-effects of early antiretroviral treatment are outweighed by reduced risk of illness conferred by these medicines. Only a randomised controlled trial, such as START, can determine this.

The NA-ACCORD data is also challenged by the researchers who originally developed the new statistical methodology. They were not convinced that the application thereof was without problems. [6]

We too are concerned that the new US recommendation:

- (1) raises theoretical concerns about continued enrolment of patients in the US, a substantial source of patients, and
- (2) is based on poor evidence and therefore might not be in the best interests of patients.

We also have further concerns that:

- (3) previous recommendations to use earlier treatment failed to recognise the negative impact of resistance and side effects, and
- (4) a minority of individuals have normal CD4 counts between 350-500 and would therefore be using treatment prior to any significant immune damage.

We support research findings that the absolute risk of HIV-related complications remains very low at a CD4 count 350–500 and that individuals enrolled in START will be carefully monitored and access treatment if their health circumstances change.

We also support the unique importance of sub-studies in START.

These studies have the potential to answer important questions relating to the impact of HIV, treatment and ageing on neurology and mental health, bone health, heart disease, lung disease and behaviour risk.

We support the START investigators, community advocates and HIV-positive people interested in this dynamic research which will help close the essential gap in our current knowledge on the safety and risks of earlier treatment.

Signed:

(Members of the INSIGHT Community Advisory Board in surname alphabetical order)

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Michael Meulbroek, Spain
David Munroe, USA
Dwight Peavy, USA
Claire Rappoport, USA
Siegfried Schwarze, Germany
Mirta Valdez, Argentina
Jo Watson, Australia

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Asociación de vih/sida (ADHARA), Diego Garcia
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Adhara-Sevilla, Juan Antonio Reina, Sevilla, Spain
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AIDS Care, Jackie Dozier, Rochester, NY, USA
AIDS Community Research Consortium, Megan O'Day, Redwood City, CA, USA
AIDS Community Research Initiative of America, Daniel Tietz, New York, NY, USA
AIDS Education Global Information System, Sister Mary Elizabeth, San Juan Capistrano, CA, USA
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AIDS Services of Dallas, Don Maison, Dallas, TX, USA
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AIDS/HIV Health Alternatives, Terry Grand, North Hollywood, CA, USA
AIDSmeds.com, Tim Horn, New York, NY, USA
Allies Linked for the Prevention of HIV and AIDS (a.l.p.h.a.), Duane Quintana, Boise, ID, USA
amFAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research, Chris Collins, Washington, DC, USA
Argus Community, Terese Smauldon, Bronx, NY, USA
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Community Partners CAB Member, Hamilton Richardson, Baltimore, MD, USA
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Community Research Initiative, Anthony Carpinelli, Boston, MA, USA
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Denver Health, Joshua Blum, Denver, CO, USA
Desert AIDS Project, Peter DeMartino, Palm Springs, CA, USA

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Dunshee House / SASG, Jake Ketchum, Dale Rogers, Seattle, WA, USA
E.C.H.O. Resource Center, Ann Dixon, North Little Rock, AR, USA
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European Community Advisory Board, Wim Vandavelde
Foundation for Integrative AIDS Research (FIAR), George Carter, Brooklyn, NY, USA
Gay City News, Doug Ireland, New York, NY, USA
Gay Men's Health Crisis / Client Advisory Board, Joseph Arsenault, Bronx, NY, USA
Global Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (GNP+/NA), Dr. Frenk Guni, Silver Spring, MD, USA
Grupo de Trabajo sobre Tratamientos del VIH (gTt), Juanse Hernández, Barcelona, Cataluña, Spain
Grupo Português de Ativistas sobre Tratamentos de VIH/SIDA (GAT), Wim Vandavelde, Portugal
Harm Reduction Institute, Larry Pasco, Indianapolis, IN, USA
Health Equities institute, San Francisco State University, Nicholas J. Alvarado, San Francisco, CA, USA
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HealthHIV, Brian Hujdich, Washington, DC, USA
Hepatitis, AIDS, Research Trust, James Hoyt, Florence, CO, USA
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HIV Denmark, Henrik Arildsen
HIV Europe, Henrik Arildsen
HIV i-Base, Polly Clayden, UK
HIVictorious, Inc., Bob Bowers, Madison, WI, USA
Holley Gerald Foundation, Calvin Gerald, Washington, DC, USA
Housing Works, Christine Campbell, Washington, DC, USA
Illinois Alliance for Sound AIDS Policy, J Michael Polasek, Iuka, IL, USA
International AIDS Empowerment, Lorenzo Sias Jr., El Paso, TX, USA
International Treatment Preparedness Coalition (ITPC), Sarah Zaidi
International Community of Women Living with HIV and AIDS-North American Region (ICW-NA), Beri Hull, Washington, DC, USA
International Foundation for Alternative Research in AIDS, Fred Schaich, Portland, OR, USA
Italian League For Fighting Aids - LILA, Alessandra Cerioli, Torino, Italy
Jo-Ray House Inc, Ida Bythersmith, Chicago, IL, USA
LaGender Inc., Dee Dee Chamblee, Atlanta, GA, USA
Lesbian, Gay, Transexual and Bisexual Spanish Federation (FELGTB),Rubén Sancho
LifeLinc, Wanda Commander, Baltimore, MD, USA
LIGHT Health & Wellness Comprehensive Services, Inc., Debbie Rock, Baltimore, MD, USA
Lion Heart Network Advocates, A. Alberto Abello, San Francisco, CA, USA
Lower East Side Harm Reduction Center, Rev Raquel Algarin, New York, NY, USA
Madrid LGTB Group (COGAM), Rafael Torres Barrio, Spain
Maine General Health Associates - The Horizon Program, Peter Schlosser, Gardiner, ME, USA
McGregor Clinic, Inc., Sharon Murphy, Fort Myers, FL, USA
Metropolitan Community Health Services, Elizabeth Shepherd, Washington, NC, USA
MiamiValleyPoz4Poz, Keith Matthews, Dayton, OH, USA
NAM, Keith Alcorn, London, UK
Nashville CARES, Joseph Interrante, Nashville, TN, USA

National AIDS Housing Coalition, Lola Adele-Oso, Washington, DC, USA
National Association of People Living With HIV/AIDS Australia, Robert Mitchell, Newtown, NSW, Australia
National Coalition for LGBT Health, Kellan Baker, Washington, DC, USA
National Pediatric AIDS Network, Gary Gale, Boulder, CO, USA
New Destiny Recovery Ministry, Rowena Simmons, Baltimore, MD, USA
New York Law School, Arthur Leonard, New York, NY, USA
North American Old Catholic Church, Archbishop Michael Seneco, Washington, DC, USA
Northwestern University, Eric Christoff, Chicago, IL, USA
NW Florida AIDS/HIV Consortium Area (NOFLAC), James Talley, Pensacola, FL, USA
OCASET, Jose Diaz, San Juan, PR, USA
OptimalTrials, James Karin, Gaithersburg, MD, USA
Outer Cape Dental Center, Timothy Martinez, South Wellfleet, MA, USA
Pacientes de Sida pro Politica Sana, Anselmo Fonseca, SJ, PR, USA
PALSS, Carmen Julious, Columbia, SC, USA
PH RockWood.com, Dr. Roscoe M Moore Jr., Rockville, MD, USA
Philadelphia FIGHT, Teresa Sullivan, Philadelphia, PA, USA
Positive East Tennesseans, Larry Frampton, Knoxville, TN, USA
Positive Life NSW, Rob Lake, Darlinghurst, Sydney, NSW, Australia
Positive Women's Network/Oakland/Local, Loren Jones, Berkeley, CA, USA
Positively Positive, Bradford McIntyre, Vancouver, BC, Canada
POZ Charlotte.org, Clinton Woods, charlotte, NC, USA
Progressive Health partners International, Dr. Frenk Guni, Frederick, MD, USA
Projecte dels NOMS-Hispanosida, Michael Meulbrook
Public Personalities Against AIDS Trust, Tendayi Westerhof, Harare, Zimbabwe
PWA Coalition Colorado, Chad Kenney, Denver, CO, USA
Research + Education Group INSIGHT Wash DC ICC CCG Member, Dale Sattergren, Portland, OR, USA
Resource Center Dallas, Bret Camp, Dallas, TX, USA
Roper St. Francis Ryan White Program, Ashley Redmond, Charleston, SC, USA
Ruth M. Rothstein CORE Center, Peter McLoyd, Chicago, IL, USA
Ryan White Part-C, George Martinez-Alicea, Guayama, PR, USA
Shanti, Derrick Mapp, San Francisco, CA, USA
SisterLove, Inc., Lisa Diane White, Atlanta, GA, USA
SomeoneCares of Atlanta, Laurency Gaston, Smyrna, GA, USA
South Carolina Campaign to End AIDS (SC-C2EA), Karen Bates, Columbia, SC, USA
Spanish Community Advisory Board (FEAT), Diego Garcia, Spain
Spanish Federation of AIDS NGOs (CESIDA), Santiago Pérez Avilés,
Status C Unknown, Shari Foster, Medford, NY, USA
SUNY Downstate Medical Center, Michael Carden, Brooklyn, NY, USA
Tapestry Health, Leslie Laurie, Florence, MA, USA
Terrence Higgins Trust, Paul Ward, London, UK
Test Positive Aware Network, Jeff Berry, Chicago, IL, USA
The Afiya Center HIV Prevention & Sexual Reproductive Justice, Marsha Jones, Dallas, TX, USA
The AIDS Institute, David Miller, Carl Schmid, Washington, DC, USA
The Center for HIV Law and Policy, Catherine Hanssens, New York, NY, USA
The Montefiore Women's Center, Anitra Pivnick, Bronx, NY, USA
2 God B The Glory, Women Supportive Housing Program, Rowena Simmons, Baltimore, MD, USA
Tom Waddell Clinic, David Glennon, San Francisco, CA, USA
Transdiaspora Network, Inc., Ariel Rojas, Brooklyn, NY, USA

Treatment Action Campaign, Vuyiseka Dubula, South Africa
 Treatment Action Group, Lei Chou, Mark Harrington, Richard Jefferys, New York, NY, USA
 Treatment Education Network, Michael Dorosh, Denver, CO, USA
 Triad Health Project, Melissa Moorehead, Greensboro, NC, USA
 TVEP, Tian Johnson, Johannesburg, South Africa
 Twin States Network, Jo Schneiderman, Guilford, VT, USA
 U.S. Positive Women's Network (PWN), Naina Khanna, Berkeley, CA, USA
 UDCAS, Jose Diaz, San Juan, PR, USA
 UKCAB, Michael Marr, London, UK
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 Virginia Commonwealth University, Joy Zeh, Richmond, VA, USA
 Wayne State University CAB, Janyce Cook, Detroit, MI, USA
 West Ohio UMC Conference AIDS Ministry, Lonny LeFever, Conover, OH, USA
 Zephyr L.T.N.P. Foundation, Inc., Loreen Willenberg, Sacramento, CA, USA

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Rafael Abadia, Palm Beach Gardens, FL, USA	Marcia Ellis, Alexandria, VA, USA
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 William Wilson, Chicago, IL, USA
 Joe Wright, Cambridge, MA, USA
 Louis Zimmerman, Aurora, CO, USA

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