

Universal funding of HIV care and immigration challenges for people living with HIV in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Background/Purpose:

Prior to 2017, only AIDS diagnoses – but not HIV infections – were notifiable to the medical officer of health in New Zealand. With primary aims to improve epidemiological surveillance and contact tracing, the Health (Protection) Amendment Act 2016 came into force in 2017 and was supported by New Zealand AIDS Foundation (NZAF). Among other significant changes to the public health responses repertoire, the Act included HIV infection in Part 1 of Schedule 1 of infectious diseases, therefore establishing a requirement for an anonymized notification. The regulatory changes coincided with an update to funding criteria widening access to antiretrovirals for people living with HIV (PLHIV) regardless of CD4 cell count, in line with international guidelines.

Approach:

This paper discusses the wider implications of making HIV infection notifiable in relation to access to HIV care and immigration options for PLHIV.

Outcomes/Impact:

As a consequence of inclusion of HIV in Schedule 1 of the Act, all PLHIV in Aotearoa New Zealand were guaranteed access to free antiretroviral treatments and HIV care, regardless whether they met other eligibility criteria to access publicly funded healthcare, including residency status. However, the regulatory changes inadvertently affected PLHIV seeking temporary visas to Aotearoa New Zealand. Applicants for visas such as student or temporary work visas may now face a heightened bar to be considered for an exception to immigration instructions, due to being automatically eligible for free antiretroviral treatments.

Innovation and Significance:

Overall, the regulatory changes resulting in universal treatment funding in Aotearoa New Zealand greatly benefitted PLHIV, including migrant populations. To overcome the challenges experienced by PLHIV seeking to migrate to Aotearoa New Zealand, NZAF and the sector are seeking to challenge the inclusion of HIV infection in Immigration New Zealand's list of "medical conditions deemed to impose significant costs and/or demands on New Zealand's health".

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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