



THE PARTNER STUDY

by Morten Eierstad, VI&HIV editor

Project Coordinator Tina Bruun from CHIP coordinates the PARTNER Study, a study on HIV transmission in sero-different partnerships in Europe. VI&HIV has interviewed Tina to learn more about the study.

-Today we know that when you are treated for HIV, the risk of transmitting the disease is reduced, Tina Bruun explains. This issue has been on the agenda everywhere, especially after the Swiss recommendations were communicated about 2 years ago. Not because people don't believe in the reduced transmission risk, but in the wake of the Swiss statement quite a few researchers called for more in-depth studies and more concrete knowledge.

What is missing?

-We need large-scale studies showing results supporting a statement about reduced transmission risk. We need studies where, e.g. homosexual persons have been included. Previous studies have been carried out, primarily, with heterosexual persons; I am not saying that we now should only focus on particular groups of people. The Partner Study includes all couples where one of the partners is HIV positive and the other negative.

How far are you with the study?

-We are 9 months into the project. The Partner Study has been approved in Denmark, Sweden, United Kingdom, and Ireland, and in a single canton in Switzerland. I have started training of the doctors and nurses at the outpatient clinics in Denmark at Hvidovre Hospital, Rigshospitalet, Aarhus Hospital, and Odense Hospital; the four outpatient clinics that have agreed to participate. Therefore, any couples where the HIV positive part attends one of these four clinics, interested in participating in the study should contact their outpatient clinic.

Who can participate?

-HIV positive persons in treatment and their partners, who have had unsafe sex within the last month. It is also a requirement that they are considering having sex again. I know this might sound a bit odd, but it is important for this study to investigate sero-different couples who have had unsafe sex. We are not encouraging people to have unsafe sex, mind you, but we know that it takes place.

How many HIV positive persons who are in relationships with HIV negative persons are having unsafe sex?

A number of studies show large variations. Between 40-90% report that they have unsafe sex with their HIV negative partner. These numbers cover everything; from a slip to a consistent decision on not using condoms. This might explain why a question about unsafe sex in sero-different partnerships can generate so many different replies.

How much the Swiss statements have had to say in this, I don't know.

Why do people have unsafe sex?

-For many good reasons. One of the most important reasons is, I guess, that sex without condom gives a sense of sex without disease, at least while it's going on, and it is also perceived as more intimate. For some, sex without condom removes the HIV from the sex.

What are you investigating?

We ask the HIV positive partner in the relationship to come for check-up at the clinic every 3rd or 6th months and to complete a questionnaire. We ask the research nurse to inform us of the person's viral load, CD4 count (immune function), and the medication that the person is taking.

The HIV negative partner is also asked to come for check-up at the clinic every 3rd or 6th months. An HIV test is done and they are asked to complete a similar questionnaire. We follow these couples for up to 2 years and we would like to follow about 90 couples in Denmark.

What makes a couple qualified for the study?

The HIV negative person and the HIV positive person must have a steady sexual relationship. This does not mean that they have to live together, or be married, but that they have sex with each other with regular intervals. This definition implies that it is possible to participate also if you have more than one sexual partner with whom you have regular sex.

You don't have to ask your doctor or nurse, if you would like to participate in the study. HIV-positive and negative persons can visit or call the outpatient clinic and get information about the Partner Study.

Do you have any concerns or thoughts about the study?

I am enthusiastic about this study. It is one of the most relevant studies within the area of HIV, not taking into account the clinical studies. The risk of transmitting the disease to your partner is a huge concern to many HIV-infected persons. When I worked as a counsellor in Hiv-Danmark, it was difficult to give any concrete advice when people were asking about the transmission risk, simply because we did not have the knowledge.

This study addresses the problem and can provide us with more knowledge about the transmission risk in the case of well-treated HIV positive persons.