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Experts split on home HIV test
Treatment could begin sooner, but safeguards must be in place to deal with impact of results

The News-Times Online
Mike Marsicano learned three years ago he was HIV positive, but he believes he may have contracted the virus that can lead to AIDS about five years earlier because he was in denial and didn't get tested.

Marsicano thinks most people are probably like him, not ready to confront the fact they might have HIV.

A small group, though, might welcome an at-home HIV test being considered by U.S. the Food and Drug Administration, he said.

"For a small subset of people who just want to get it out of the way and know, this could be a good thing," said Marsicano, 35, of Danbury.

The test, called OraQuick Advance, is made by OraSure Technology, of Bethlehem, Pa. Widely available in health clinics and doctor's offices, the FDA is considering permitting it to be sold over the counter.

A person takes the OraQuick test by swabbing the mouth and inserting the swab into a vial of fluid that comes with the test. Twenty minutes later, the device indicates whether it detects the presence of HIV-1 or HIV-2 antibodies.

Experts and individuals think while the test could help patients get treatment sooner, it could be disastrous if people discover they are HIV positive and react with panic or despair.

Dr. Paul Nee, director of the Danbury Hospital HIV clinic, has seen the positive effects the rapid test has for doctors and patients. A doctor can get a patient's test results in about 30 minutes and immediately begin counseling and treatment, as opposed to waiting for seven to 10 days to learn the results of a standard test.

"There is not the anxiety of waiting," Nee said. "There is definitely an advantage."

There could be other advantages of taking the test at home can include not having to deal with a doctor and remaining anonymous. Perhaps the test would compel people to modify their behavior, he said.

But Marsicano said if a person has to go to a public place like a drug store to purchase the test, it wouldn't exactly be confidential.

"It is hard enough to buy a condom, this would almost be impossible," he said. "You would go to the counter, look over your shoulder."

He said the marketing of the product would have to be modern and discreet.

Danbury High School senior Lauren Cooper, 17, agrees buying the test from a drug store could be "embarrassing."

Even so, said Michael Crescimanno, 18, a Western Connecticut State University student, "It would be good to get the answer right away at home."

But he worries about the stress and despair people could feel if they got a positive test and were alone.

Danbury High School senior Bethany Colley, 17, also wondered if the emotional ramifications for people who found out they were HIV positive could outweigh the benefits.

"That is a big factor," Nee said. "There is a lot of stigma associated."

In that vein, "the biggest issue that has come up repeatedly is suicidal tendencies," said FDA scientist Elliot Cowan.

Interfaith AIDS Ministry provides services to those with HIV, including counseling, medication and food. Melinda Storey Weisberg, the ministry's director, believes when people learn they are HIV positive, "they immediately need counseling. They need someone to talk to. It is not something you want to privately find out.

She doesn't think most people would recognize the consequences of what it means to be HIV positive.

"There are some real problems with it," she said. "This is very different, a self test. I think there are some real dangers. There has not been enough discussion on this."

Marsicano feels like the packaging for such a kit would be "critical."

He hopes the packaging would include a toll-free phone number to refer people to a local agency where they can get help to deal with the disease and its emotional impact. "You don't want this thing to cause suicides," he said. "Something like that would prevent people from going off the deep end."

Company officials said they would develop instructions with the kit that would probably include a telephone number and Web site address.

Nee said OraQuick Advance also has to have information on its packaging stating that people need a blood test, in addition to the test kit, to confirm they are HIV positive.

FDA officials said they would not yet ask the panel of independent experts whether to recommend approval of the product. They are first seeking advice on appropriate standards for these kinds of products.

The FDA usually follows the advice of its committees but has the final say whether to authorize products for over-the-counter sales.

One other home test, made by Home Access Health Corp., is approved for sale in the United States by the FDA. People taking this test must take a sample and mail it to a lab for results. They later anonymously call an 800 number to get their results.