



# Media Release

Date: 28<sup>th</sup> May 2015

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## Groundbreaking Research Supports Immediate HIV Treatment

The Queensland AIDS Council has welcomed research that supports the health benefits of immediate treatment for HIV positive people.

The *Strategic Timing and Anti – Retroviral Treatment (START)* study which began in 2009 was an international randomised clinical trial coordinated by the Kirby Institute in partnership with three other international research centres. The START study involved over 35 countries, including Australia, and enrolled over 4500 people with higher CD4 counts (above 500 CD4 cells, a measure of immune function).

The START participants were randomised into two groups –

1. Begin HIV treatment immediately
2. Wait until the CD4 count declined to 350 CD4 cells, before starting HIV treatment.

The decision was made to end the START study early due to:

1. Early treatment benefit was observed across various populations, including geographic region.
2. Reductions due to early treatment were observed in both serious AIDS and serious non –AIDS clinical events.
3. Risk of serious AIDS events and deaths due to non AIDS events including major cardiovascular events renal and liver disease.
4. Renal and liver disease and cancer was reduced by more than 50% among those in the early treatment group when compared with the deferred group.

Importantly though, the START results confirmed there was no harm associated with immediate treatment.

Queensland AIDS Council Executive Director Michael Scott highlighted the importance of the results:

“Queensland AIDS Council welcomes the exciting START results, which add to the growing evidence for early treatment of HIV. Within Queensland gay men are at the highest risk of HIV, accounting for approximately 75% of new notifications. These results are confirmation of what our community had suspected for a long time.

“Last year, QuAC implemented the Ending HIV campaign which focussed on the three concepts : Test More, Treat Early and Stay Safe. We did this because we understand that HIV prevention is far more complex than condom reinforcement, and the START results show that the Treat Early message was on point and supported by science.

“Queensland AIDS Council will be promoting the findings that early treatment, and immediate treatment is good for the health of HIV positive people. This message will be particularly promoted within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through the 2 Spirits Program. Currently the Queensland AIDS Council provides support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living with HIV.

Current guidance on when to start treatment issued by ASHM, which included input from both AFAO and NAPWHA representatives recommends that all people with HIV above 500 CD4 cells should consider starting HIV treatment, however this guidance has recognised that there is limited evidence on the balance between the potential risks and benefits of early HIV treatment. This is now answered definitively by the START findings.

In 2014 Australia PBS restrictions on people living with HIV starting HIV treatment were lifted – previously patients without clinical symptoms had to have a CD4 cell count below 500 CD4 to qualify for HIV treatment through the PBS. Queensland AIDS Council, now into its 31<sup>st</sup> year, has been working hand in hand with our communities to promote health and wellbeing of people living with HIV. The START results are another step forward in our understanding of HIV treatment and it is only collaboration between affected communities, researchers, the scientific community, non government organisations and government at all levels that will assist us in reaching the ambitious UNAIDS 90-90-90 targets by 2020.

For further information contact Michael Scott, Executive Director, Queensland AIDS Council on 0427 138 373 or [mscott@quac.org.au](mailto:mscott@quac.org.au).

**ENDS**

*The Queensland AIDS Council was established in 1984 and is a community-based, not-for-profit, registered health promotion charity that works to improve the health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Queenslanders, prevent HIV and build the capacity of the community.*