

RCBUS Provides Friendly, Discreet HIV Testing in Ubud

by Ibu Cat Wheeler

While HIV rates in all other ASEAN countries are dropping, in Indonesia they are still on the rise. The overall prevalence of HIV in Indonesia is 0.3% of the population (1/3,000 people), concentrated in the high risk groups of injecting drug users, sex workers of both genders and men using sex workers. Most transmission is heterosexual but the fastest growing groups are young gay men (YGM) and housewives who catch the virus from their husbands. The HIV rates in YGM in Jakarta rose from 2% on 2003 to 17% in 2011. In female sex workers the infection rate averages 15% but can be as high as 35% in places.

Bali has the second or third highest rate of HIV in Indonesia, with Papua leading with 4% of the local population or 1 in 25 people infected. Teens in Indonesia are at risk early, with 30% of them sexually active in junior high school and 70% on graduation from high school. Gianyar has 22 cafes/bars where sex is sold and 240 known sex workers.

Diagnosis and treatment of HIV in Bali has been difficult because testing required multiple clinic visits, which is not convenient for working people and is also expensive. Shyness is a big issue; people are reluctant to be seen at an HIV clinic, or known to be HIV positive.

RCBUS member Dr Steve Wignall, an HIV specialist, created the model of a friendly, discreet clinic open in the late afternoon and evening when people were more at leisure, where the services were free and the results available in an hour. The first Bali Peduli (Bali Cares) clinic was opened in Kuta in 2011. This clinic mostly serves young gay men, about 17% of whom test positive for HIV and syphilis.

A \$56,000 Global Grant for the Ubud HIV clinic was approved in 2013. The funds were used to renovate an unused part of a government clinic, hire a doctor, nurse and technician, pay for equipment and supplies and provide an outreach program in high risk areas. Of the unspent balance, \$1000 will go to monitoring and evaluation and \$2,000 for a Gianyar-wide training program. Ongoing clinic expenses are met through fundraising and community support.

This year almost 700 patients were tested at the Bali Peduli Ubud clinic, with 44 testing positive for HIV and 62 on medication (some coming from other parts of Bali for treatment because the clinic is so pleasant). Most of the positive patients are pregnant women infected by their husbands. The outreach program also tests sex workers at night using a mobile clinic.

Some people are still not aware that HIV cannot be transmitted casually, but only through the exchange of body fluids during sex, blood transfusion or mother's milk. HIV is no longer a death sentence. It's easily treated with a single daily pill. The medication for treating HIV is provided without cost in Indonesia by the government (costing \$180/year as opposed to \$15,000 a year in the US). Infected patients who take their medication regularly can live normal lives and cut HIV transmission by 96%.