Attn: All clinicians  
Re: Increased cases of HIV in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in Far North Queensland.

There has been an increase in the number of HIV diagnoses in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in Far North Queensland (FNQ). Most cases have been diagnosed in people resident in the Cairns region; some also travel to, or reside in regional or remote communities. The majority of cases have been in men, many of whom have male and female partners, but do not identify as gay or bisexual. Sexual contact appears to be the main route of transmission. 63% of new cases diagnosed in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in FNQ since 2014 have been in people aged less than 40 years. Contact tracing has been undertaken for all cases, but it is highly likely that others may have been exposed, and these people may be unaware of their risk.

A number of people newly diagnosed with HIV have also had syphilis co-infection. Syphilis is known to increase the risk of HIV transmission. There are syphilis outbreaks affecting young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across northern Australia and also affecting gay men and men who have sex with men (MSM) in the Cairns and Hinterland HHS area.

Many people experience barriers when accessing services for sexual health care, including experiences of shame and stigma and concerns re confidentiality. Ensuring your service is welcoming and non-judgemental can increase attendance and facilitate better health outcomes.

At risk groups: Most of the HIV cases diagnosed in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in FNQ have been in men aged 20 - 40 years who have male sex partners. All gay men and men who have male sexual partners are also at risk.

Offer opportunistic HIV, syphilis and other STI testing to all people in at risk groups when they attend health services.

Key points:
- Continue to offer syphilis and HIV testing to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15-39 years as part of a comprehensive STI screen.
- Ensure all clients who test positive for chlamydia or gonorrhoea are also tested for syphilis and HIV.
- Consider ways to make your service accessible for all clients.
- Prompt treatment and contact tracing are critical to STI control.
- Provide information to clients about risk reduction and regular testing if they change partners.

Further information and assistance with contact tracing:
- Australasian Society for HIV, Viral Hepatitis and Sexual Health Medicine (ASHM) resources: http://www.ashm.org.au/HIV/
- Your local Sexual Health service, Men’s and Women’s Health service or contact tracing officer
- In Cairns and Hinterland: Cairns Sexual Health Service HIV Response CNC Lucy Thallon and Cairns Contact Tracing Officer Debbie Penney on (07) 4226 4769.

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