

# **Implementing and evaluating a regional strategy to improve testing rates in VHA patients at risk for HIV utilizing the QUERI process as a guiding framework**

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## Abstract

**Background:** We describe how we used the framework of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (QUERI) to develop an intervention to improve rates of HIV diagnostic testing. This venture was prompted by the observation by the CDC that 25% of HIV-infected patients do not know their diagnosis, a point of substantial importance to the VA, the largest provider of HIV care in the United States.

**Methods:** Following the QUERI steps we evaluated 1.) whether undiagnosed HIV infection is a high-risk, high-volume clinical issue within the VHA; 2.) whether there are evidence-based recommendations for HIV testing; 3.) whether there are gaps in the performance of VHA HIV testing; and 4.) the barriers and facilitators to improving current practice in the VHA

Based on our findings, we developed and initiated a QUERI step 4/phase 1 two-site pilot project using the precepts of the Chronic Care Model. Our improvement strategy relies upon electronic clinical reminders to provide *decision support*; audit/feedback as a *clinical information system*; and appropriate changes in *delivery system design*. These activities are complemented by academic detailing and social marketing interventions to achieve *provider activation*.

**Results:** Our preliminary formative evaluation indicates the need to ensure leadership and team buy-in, address facility-specific barriers, refine the reminder and address factors that contribute to inter-clinic variances in HIV testing rates. Preliminary unadjusted data from the first seven months of our intervention show 3 – 5 fold increases in the proportion of at risk patients who are offered HIV testing at the two-sites where the pilot project has been undertaken; no change was seen at control sites.

**Discussion and Conclusion:** This project demonstrates the early success of the application of the QUERI process to the development of an intervention to improve HIV testing rates. Preliminary unadjusted results show that the coordinated use of audit/feedback, provider activation and organizational change can significantly increase HIV testing rates for at-risk patients. We are refining our intervention prior to extending our work to a small-scale, regional multi-site evaluation (QUERI step 4/phase 2). We also plan to evaluate the durability/sustainability of the intervention effect, the costs of HIV testing and the number of newly identified HIV-infected patients. Ultimately, we will evaluate this intervention in other geographically dispersed sites (QUERI step 4/phases 3 and 4).

# Background

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that approximately 25% of the nearly one million Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) -infected persons in the United States are not aware of their status [1]. Thus one of the key barriers to the receipt of care for HIV infection is underdiagnosis of this condition, particularly in the early, asymptomatic phases of illness when medical intervention is highly cost-effective [2,3].

The purpose of this paper is to provide an illustrative case study that demonstrates the application of the Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (QUERI) 6-step/4-phase framework to the development and implementation of a program to improve rates of HIV diagnostic testing in US Veterans Health Administration (VHA) medical care facilities. The designers of the VHA's QUERI framework and QUERI researchers, argue that use of this process or framework will provide important benefits, in terms of greater success in designing and conducting implementation research programs to yield quality improvements and research findings and insights {Perlin, et al. in this issue} [4]. But clear evidence of these benefits is lacking {Mittman, in this issue}.

The key issues addressed in this paper regard how the QUERI framework guided our efforts to identify specific gaps in care, barriers to diagnosis and the loci within the VHA where interventions to improve HIV diagnostic testing would have the greatest impact, to develop an intervention to improve diagnostic testing, to obtain institutional support and funding for this project, and to implement a staged series of studies to evaluate the effectiveness of this program. We also discuss how we utilized known quality improvement strategies to change the behavior of primary care providers in regards to HIV testing.

## QUERI

The QUERI program consists of ten, independent disease-focused QUERI Centers and a supporting organization within the VHA's Health Services Research and Development Service (HSR&D) {Perlin, et al. in this issue} [4-6]. QUERI is a national system that is designed to translate research discoveries and innovations into patient care and health systems improvements, redefine, or at least refine, the interdependent relationships among clinicians, managers, policy makers, and researchers, accelerate the implementation of new research findings into clinical care by creating a bridge between those performing research and those responsible for health system operation, and expand the scientific basis of implementing proven medical advances into clinical practice .

The specific QUERI Centers are the operational arm of QUERI. These centers are engaged in activities to both identify and correct gaps in clinical quality and performance, and to develop generalizable, scientifically valid knowledge regarding improvement strategies and organizational change processes [4].

## HIV/HEPATITIS QUERI Center

The VHA is the largest single provider of HIV care in the USA, providing care for over 20,000 HIV infected persons or roughly 40% of the nation's HIV-infected veteran population [1,7]. The original mission of the HIV/Hepatitis QUERI Center was to increase access to, and uptake of, evidence-based HIV care, and to improve the care that patients receive for their disease and associated co-morbid diseases; more recently the scope of this center has expanded to included persons with chronic viral hepatitis.

Over the past decade, in the developed world infection by HIV has been transformed from a fatal disease with rapid progression to clinical AIDS and death, to a chronic illness that can be successfully managed through outpatient-based care over long periods of active life. Advances in the effectiveness of treatment,

however, have been accompanied by new challenges for healthcare systems as they aim to provide adequate chronic illness care to large numbers of ambulatory HIV patients.

The highest priority goal of the HIV/Hepatitis QUERI Center is to improve access to HIV care through better screening and casefinding among veterans to enable earlier treatment. Better disease identification could result in earlier access to appropriate treatment, reduced complications from untreated illness, and better quality of life per the healthcare dollar spent.

Previous accomplishments of the HIV/Hepatitis QUERI Center include the development effective decision support tools for HIV providers, analyses of the cardiovascular and cerebrovascular risk from long-term highly active antiretroviral therapy, determination of the scientific rationale for early identification of HIV infection in the VHA, development and assessment of strategies to improve medication adherence, and validation of the utility of rapid tests for diagnosis of HIV infection in the VHA [8-13].

## **A QUERI approach to improving HIV testing rates through use of the QUERI six-step/four-phase framework**

The overall QUERI 6 step process is described elsewhere in this issue {Mittman, in this issue}. In the following sections we show how we followed Steps 1 to 3 of the QUERI process to demonstrate that undiagnosed HIV infection is a high-risk, high-volume clinical issue (QUERI step 1), that there are evidence-based recommendations for HIV testing (QUERI step 2), and that there are gaps in the performance of HIV testing in the VHA (QUERI step 3). This work was made possible by funding available specifically through core funding provided to HIV/Hepatitis QUERI by the VHA QUERI program.

Based on this foundation and with the support of theoretical and empirical considerations we have developed and initiated a two-site pilot project (QUERI step 4/phase 1) with the goal of refining our interventions to improve rates of HIV testing prior to launching a small-scale multi-site evaluation in 5 separate facilities (QUERI step 4/phase 2). The two-site pilot project was supported by QUERI Locally Initiated Project funds. The subsequent small-scale, multi-site evaluation was, after rigorous peer review, awarded full funding through what is known as a VHA HSR&D Service Directed Project.

### ***Step 1: Priority Condition/Issue: is undiagnosed HIV infection a high-risk, high-volume clinical issue within the VA?***

The observation by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that 25% of HIV-infected patients in the United States do not know their status is of great relevance to the VHA. As the VHA treats over 20,000 HIV-infected patients per year [1], approximately 7,000 VHA patients are at risk of being diagnosed with HIV and treated only when they become symptomatic and severely immunosuppressed. In contrast, HIV patients benefit greatly from early diagnosis and treatment [2,3,14]. Thus, increased HIV testing can substantially reduce the proportion of newly diagnosed patients who present with concurrent complications of profound immunodeficiency [3,15] and extend survival for the average HIV-infected patient by 1.5 years [2,3].

### ***Step 2: Evidence-based Practices: Are there evidence-based recommendations for HIV testing?***

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) gives a Grade A recommendation to HIV screening for all adolescents and adults who are at increased risk for HIV infection or who receive health care in a high-prevalence setting. i.e., where  $\geq 1\%$  of the patient population is known to be HIV-infected [16]. Many other

expert bodies have offered similar recommendations [17-22]. The VHA has endorsed the USPSTF guidelines for HIV infection and has identified testing for HIV as being a high priority [23,24].

Furthermore, the cost-effectiveness of HIV testing in the VHA is well established. As shown by a HIV/Hepatitis QUERI affiliated investigator and others, for a population with a prevalence of HIV infection of  $\geq 1\%$ , the cost of one-time screening for HIV infection is approximately \$40,000 per quality-adjusted life-year gained [2,3]. Analyses that consider the relationship of diagnosis and treatment on HIV transmission show that the cost of routine HIV screening is  $< \$50,000$  per quality-adjusted life-year gained unless the prevalence of HIV infection is  $< 0.05\%$  [2,25,26]. Many well-accepted screening tests are less cost effective [27,28], and analyses done by other members of the HIV/Hepatitis QUERI group indicated that VHA patients have rates of HIV much higher than this 0.05% lower bound of cost-effectiveness [29].

### ***Step 3: Quality/Performance Gaps: Are there gaps in the performance of HIV testing in the VA?***

Previous studies done by HIV/Hepatitis QUERI, the VHA Public Health Strategic Healthcare Group (PHSHG, a dedicated national VHA program office for guiding HIV care services) and other VHA groups have shown that only 30 – 50% of VHA patients with known, documented risk factors have undergone HIV testing [11,24,30]. Furthermore, 50% of VHA patients have advanced levels of immune suppression at the time of HIV diagnosis. These patients have, on average, 3.7 years of VHA care before their HIV is diagnosed [31].

To confirm and extend these data, we evaluated the rates of HIV testing in VHA patients seen in the five southern California and Nevada facilities (otherwise referred to as Veterans Integrated Service Network 22 or VISN22). We found that between January 1999 and December 2004 only 30% of the 45,776 at-risk patients (i.e., persons with positive laboratory tests or diagnostic codes for hepatitis, sexually transmitted diseases, and/or substance abuse) had been tested for HIV infection. The rate of testing for at-risk patients ranged from a low of 8% in primary care clinics to a high of 47% in substance abuse clinics. The low testing rates and large number of at-risk patients in primary care clinics (nearly ten times as great as in substance use clinics) pointed to the need for an intervention to focused on improvements in HIV testing performance in VHA primary care clinics.

Next, to better understand the source of gaps and to uncover facilitators to improving current practice we reviewed VHA policies regarding HIV testing and surveyed providers practices and attitudes regarding HIV testing at two VHA facilities.

*Organizational factors:* Public Law 100-322 requires that VHA patients provide voluntary informed consent for HIV testing and that providers document pre- and post-test counseling [16,23]. In addition, many VHA providers regard HIV testing and pre- and post-counseling to be the sole provenance of specially trained HIV counselors [32]. Furthermore, standard policy has been to require all patients with positive or negative test results to come back to clinic for face-to-face post-test counseling. The post-test counseling appointment is problematic as many VHA providers do not have sufficient appointment slots to allow for timely in-person patient notification of test results (i.e., within 1-2 weeks of the test).

*Provider willingness and ability to perform HIV testing:* Surveys of VHA primary care providers indicated that lack of knowledge of individuals' risk factors for HIV infection, the time requirements to fulfill necessary counseling processes [32-34] and anxiety about post-test counseling patients who have positive test results [15,35,36] were substantive barriers to ordering HIV tests.

*Patient acceptance of HIV testing:* A systematic review of 62 studies found that acceptance rates of voluntary HIV testing in the United States varies from 11% to 91% [37]. Importantly, this review found that higher acceptance rates were associated with confidentiality protections (which are strongly protected by VHA policy and procedures) and the provider's belief that testing would be beneficial.

## ***Step 4: Identify and implement interventions to promote best practices***

We describe our QUERI step 4 activities in further detail below. We are now nearing the end of phase 1 of step 4, wherein we are conducting a two-site pilot project.

### **Methods**

#### **Development and initiation of a program to improve rates of HIV testing**

##### Conceptual basis of the implementation interventions

As required by the QUERI process, we paid careful attention to the selection of a quality improvement model upon which to base our intervention. We elected to base our intervention upon the *Chronic Care Model* (CCM). Interventions based on the CCM have been widely and successfully used in clinical preventive care services and in chronic care management [38-42]. The CCM emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive, coordinated, systems approach to care that promotes productive interactions between active, informed patients and prepared, proactive, professional health care teams. In this project, we have emphasized decision support tool expansion and clinical information system enhancements to facilitate coordination of care through the use of clinical reminders as part of the array of cardinal features delineated in the CCM. Further, guidance for this implementation strategy was provided by Rogers, whose seminal work on diffusion promotes the use of opinion leaders or champions to facilitate change or innovation adoption, and highlights the importance of individuals' social networks, organizational leadership, and organizational structure [43].

Key components of the CCM are: 1.) a clear definition of optimal care, i.e., offering HIV-testing to at risk patients, 2.) a road map for changing the system, and 3.) an effective improvement strategy [44]. Effective CCM implementation strategies contain the following elements: *decision support*; *clinical information systems*; *delivery system design*, and *patient self management* [38,45-48]. We therefore developed an improvement strategy that uses clinical reminders to provide *decision support*; audit/feedback as a *clinical information system*; and organizational change to achieve an appropriate *delivery system design*. These activities are complemented by academic detailing and social marketing interventions to achieve *provider activation* to ensure that providers have the skills and motivation to improve their performance [38,47-49]. The CCM and the Institute for Healthcare Improvements Breakthrough Series have both identified the need for provider activities to achieve transform group norms sustainable change [38,47,48]. We therefore chose to implement a multi-faceted provider activation program that includes academic detailing and social marketing [39,50,51]. Finally, we also promoted HIV counseling to increase *patient self management* by wide scale publicity of the HIV testing program in clinic waiting rooms and check-in areas.

##### Components of the intervention

*Decision Support:* To leverage institutional resources, we implemented a real-time, electronic clinical reminder, which had been developed by the VHA PSHHG, to identify patients at higher than average risk for HIV infection and to encourage providers to offer HIV testing to such individuals (figure 1). Clinical reminders, widely used to implement quality improvement, are well-suited for use in the VHA because of the system-wide computerized patient record. The HIV Testing Clinical Reminder is triggered by evidence by Hepatitis B or C infection, illicit drug use, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), homelessness, and documented risk factors for Hepatitis C infection. All these data elements can be automatically extracted from the VHA electronic medical record. The reminder is resolved or satisfied by ordering an HIV test, recording the result of an HIV test performed elsewhere, indicating that the patient is not competent to consent to testing or specifying that the patient refuses HIV testing. Once satisfied, the reminder is no longer triggered.

Use of clinical reminders in individual patients when combined with audit/feedback and organizational changes has been shown to improve performance of vaccination, cardiovascular risk reduction, and breast

and colorectal cancer screening [9,10,45,46,49,52-56]. Electronic clinical reminders are a standard well-developed technology with which VHA providers have great familiarity and have been shown to be well suited to improve performance of tasks similar in nature to HIV test ordering and counseling. Furthermore, our previous work has shown that use of clinical reminders contributes to 10-30% increases in the rates of appropriate interventions in VHA HIV-infected patients [9,10,57]. Thus this intervention satisfies the FITT (fit between individuals, task and technology) framework for assessing the suitability of using this intervention in our project [58].

*Clinical information system:* We designed an audit-feedback system wherein healthcare providers are informed of group performance in regards to HIV screening rates in at-risk patients [59]. A meta-analysis of 85 trials demonstrates that use of audit-feedback is effective in improving practice, especially when baseline adherence is low [60]. We have distributed audit-feedback reports (figure 2) to senior medical center level clinical managers, outpatient clinic managers and primary care team leaders at the Los Angeles and the San Diego stations. The contents of the reports have been discussed during academic detailing visits to primary care team meetings and in the social marketing campaign. Informal provider feedback regarding the content of these reports has been positive.

*Provider activation:* We implemented a provider activation program that includes academic detailing and social marketing [39,50,51,60]. This approach recognizes that the engagement of providers and the use of multiple modalities is necessary to achieve and sustain the transformation of group norms and maximize quality improvement [38,39,46-48,50,51,60].

The academic detailing component of the project involves multiple presentations by clinical champions (physician and nursing staff) supplemented by project staff to the primary care team meetings and educational sessions. We have specifically targeted primary care clinic leaders as local, organizational opinion leaders [61,62].

We used social marketing with providers to reinforce the importance of changing their practice regarding HIV testing and further motivate them to do so. Social marketing entails the development of a shared buy-in to the overall goal of the behavior change and is predicated on *social exchange theory*, which borrows from social and behavioral science doctrines in emphasizing the client/patient/provider as the starting point [63]. The social marketing element includes regular informal discussions of the basis for and benefits of increased rates of HIV testing by project staff during frequent ad hoc visits to the primary care clinic and presentations to sub-station and clinic leadership.

As per the precepts of social marketing theory [63], we have undertaken audience segmentation for focused detailing to nurses, mid-level providers and physicians, channel analysis to optimize the setting and materials for a these audience segments, *goal orientation* to keep stakeholders focused on why they are involved (e.g., emphasizing the differing tasks by nurses [pre-test counseling ] and physicians [order entry]), and *process tracking* to monitor progress and provide feedback for refinement and revision of strategies (i.e., through audit-feedback and formative evaluation), which can be considered an intervention itself.

Based on survey responses by physicians, mid-level providers, nurses and case managers, we have also developed provider education materials that focus on preparing providers to use the reminders effectively, making providers aware of HIV risk factors not captured by the reminder (i.e., multiple unprotected sexual contacts), and increasing provider comfort and abilities to provide pre- and post-test HIV counseling.

In our step 4/phase 1 project all social marketing has been performed by senior project staff. Using the insights gained in the two-site pilot project, as we progress down the pipeline to a step 4/phase 2 small-scale, multi-site evaluation we will rely on a train-the-trainer model to activate local champions. Project staff will support the local champions with regular visits (monthly for the first 3 months of local implementation then quarterly), weekly telephone conference calls and e-mail support.

*Delivery System Changes:*

We have strived to ensure that all providers are trained to use a recent revision of the VHA HIV Consent Form [64]. This new document includes all the necessary elements of pre-test HIV counseling and thus facilitates the consent process for healthcare providers who lack specific training regarding the performance of HIV counseling.

We have also encouraged nurse-based rather than physician-based pre-test counseling [65]. Nurses perform many educational, health promotion and disease prevention tasks as well as physicians [66-68]. A recent meta-regression showed that organizational changes that shift responsibilities from physicians to other personnel, most often nurses, are effective in improving preventive care [57].

Moreover, we have encouraged providers to use a streamlined HIV counseling process that covers all the required elements of HIV pre-test counseling and reduces the time of pre-test counseling to 2-3 instead of 10-15 minutes with some counseling lasting as long as 35 minutes [69]. Similarly, we have reduced the logistical challenges of post-test HIV counseling [16,23]. Given the gravity of the information, post-test counseling for persons with new positive HIV test results strongly warrants face-to-face counseling. In contrast, we have alerted providers that for patients with a negative result, post test counseling can be very brief and can be done over the telephone [70-73]. To ensure compliance with post-test counseling requirements, we have distributed sample scripts for transmitting the results of the test.

In addition to being theory based, these interventions are informed by empirical evidence provided by studies in urgent care clinics, emergency departments, and STD clinics that show increased testing rates and patient receipt of test results after implementation of structural changes such as improved staff training in pre- and post-testing screening, introduction of streamlined counseling, and substitution of telephonic post-test counseling in place of a required return visit for face-to-face notification [70-72].

#### Collaborating with clinical services to design an appropriate intervention

We explicitly sought broad institutional support for this project. This included the support of the VHA PHSHG, and the VISN 22 Director, Quality Improvement Council, Clinical Practices Council, and the Clinical Performance Committee. VISN22 leadership agreed to make HIV testing a performance monitor, to support installation of the HIV Testing Clinical Reminder and to participate as full partners in enhancing station accountability. After obtaining national and regional support, we also made presentations to, and received support from, the Medical Executive Committees, Chiefs of Staff, Ambulatory Care Leadership, primary care teams and the HIV Coordinators at our two intervention stations. Receipt of all this support was greatly facilitated by the products of QUERI steps 1 – 3.

#### **Evaluation plan**

The primary endpoints of this step 4/phase 1 two-site pilot project are the effect of the intervention on the rates of resolution of the HIV clinical reminder and of HIV Testing in at risk patients. A multi-level logistic regression analysis of the HIV testing rate will be done to adjust for the covariates at patient, provider, and sub-station levels and for clustering.

To allow us to assess whether the provider activation module, which is the most labor intensive component of our intervention, independently contributes to improvement in the rates of HIV screening and testing we have fully implemented this module only at the largest sub-stations at the intervention sites. The interventions at the other, smaller and geographically distant sub-stations differ in that email and telephonic outreach largely replace personal outreach to promote academic detailing; all other tools (i.e., audit/feedback, provision of printed materials such as email communications, pocket cards, posters and flyers, and removal of organizational barriers) are the same at all sites.

In addition, we are conducting formative evaluations to further refine our intervention and assess the organizational factors that determine the generalizability of the intervention [74]. The overall aim is to better understand the influences that impact the success of the intervention by identifying contextually relevant factors (i.e., facilitators and barriers) and assessing the degree that behaviors leading to improved

testing performance become part of routine practice [74]. Semi-structured interviews with key informants will provide qualitative data regarding the effectiveness of the mode used for providing audit/feedback, the usefulness and usability of the testing reminder, and the efficiency of the consenting/counseling process. Interview questions will employ rapid ethnographic assessment methods to explore the ecological context of HIV testing [75-78].

To assess the degree to which behaviors leading to improved testing performance are institutionalized (i.e., become embedded in standard operating procedures), leading clinicians and administrators at each sub-station will complete a Level of Institutionalization survey. The instrument measures four subsystems that support routine use of an innovation: production, where it must be integrated with other routine clinical services; maintenance, where employees must support it; supportive, where it must have a stable source of funding; and managerial, where it must be assigned to a specific service, staff must have written job descriptions, and performance is required to be measured and reported [79].

Finally, we are generating a comprehensive analysis of the workload and implementation costs of HIV screening and testing programs, using Business Case Modeling, a method for constructing data-driven models that forecast costs under varying specified conditions that support managerial or technical decision making. This is warranted as the models of the cost-effectiveness of HIV screening do not address the upfront costs of implementing screening programs across differing clinic settings [2,3,80].

## Results

Using the described methods, in mid-2005 we launched a QUERI step 4/phase 1 two-site pilot project to evaluate and improve HIV screening and testing rates in the primary care clinics of the Los Angeles and San Diego facilities (stations) in VISN22. The three remaining stations in VISN22 (Las Vegas, Long Beach, and Loma Linda) served as controls.

Preliminary unadjusted data show an overall increase rate of reminder satisfaction from 22% to 64% at Los Angeles and from 33% to 70% at San Diego during the first 7 months of this project. Although the amount of salutary change varied across the geographically dispersed substations of the two study stations, all substations showed substantial increases in the rate of resolution of the HIV Testing Clinical Reminder. In contrast, no change in the reminder resolution rate was seen at the other VISN 22 stations where the intervention was not undertaken. Actual monthly order rates for HIV tests (as opposed to other means of satisfying the HIV Testing Clinical Reminder) increased 3 – 5 fold.

Of note, we found an unexpected high variation in the ratio of HIV test refusals to test performances with some sub-stations recording 10 – 20 times as many refusals as actual tests whereas other sites had fewer refusals than tests. These results are at odds with studies that show higher rates of acceptance of HIV testing [37] Our preliminary analyses suggest that some providers take more care than others in terms of informing patients of the benefits of knowing their HIV status. Furthermore, the rates of satisfying the HIV clinical reminder and the ratio of HIV test refusal to performance appear to differ substantially among provider types (i.e., attending physician versus mid-level practitioner versus trainee)

Thus far our preliminary formative evaluation also indicates that further work needs to be done to address facility-specific barriers to HIV testing. Particular areas of concern include the development of procedures to address variances in the adoption of new technologies, such as the use of new, electronic paperless versions of the VHA HIV consent form. Other important station-to-station differences involve workflow patterns. For example, the San Diego station routinely utilizes more nursing personnel for normal clinic routines. Therefore, intake nurses there were expected to share consenting and counseling responsibilities to promote efficient processing of at-risk patients. The process of addressing reminders at the Los Angeles station, on the other hand, is more physician-driven and requires targeting activation strategies to their different role and skill set.

Our step 4/phase 1 two-site project has also allowed us to identify aspects of the HIV testing clinical reminder that lead to provider dissatisfaction. In particular providers would like the reminder to very clearly indicate what specific factor(s) triggered the HIV Testing Clinical Reminder so that they can better counsel patients as to why HIV testing is relevant to the patient's circumstances. Providers have also expressed a strong belief that homelessness *per se* is not a substantial risk factor for HIV infection and that HIV testing may not be relevant to persons with a limited life expectancy. Finally, providers perceive the layout of the reminder to be unduly complicated

## Discussion/Conclusions

This project has greatly benefited from practical guidance and consistent support of the VHA QUERI program. For example, a step 3 study by Owens et al. showing that fewer than 50% of at risk VHA patients were tested for HIV, formed an important part of the basis of our rationale to proceed to step 4 [11]. These results were confirmed by further evaluations supported by core funding provided through QUERI. In addition, the QUERI process guided our analysis of the importance of improving VHA HIV testing rates, our assessment of the gaps in care and the development of a multi-faceted project with broad-based institutional support to close this quality gap. Although full analysis of our Step 4/phase 1 two-site pilot project results is pending and efforts to gauge the sustainability of our project are only just beginning, release of our preliminary results [81] has attracted considerable attention from other VHA facilities, some of which are undertaking similar efforts to implement the electronic HIV Testing Clinical Reminder. Specific issues of particular importance to our intervention are discussed below.

Importance of leadership and team buy-in: The successful implementation of this project and the favorable preliminary results could not have been achieved without support at multiple administrative and clinical levels. The VHA PSHG provided invaluable support by promoting HIV testing within the VHA and developing the HIV Testing Clinical Reminder. Their backing facilitated our ability to get the support of VISN22 network leadership. This in turn enabled us to elicit support for institutionalization of the reminder, organizational changes and implementation of the provider activation program at the individual stations where the Step 4/phase 1 two-site pilot project was launched and subsequently to get the buy-in of individual primary team leaders.

However, ultimately provider support is crucial. Acquiring this support required us to address issues of concern to providers most notably facility-specific barriers to HIV testing, variances in the prevalence of HIV risk factors, issues related to the use of the reminder and factors that contribute to variances in actual HIV testing versus refusal of HIV testing.

Facility-specific barriers: Despite being a single healthcare system, there are substantial variances in local policies, processes and institutional culture within the VHA that must be addressed by site-specific customization of implementation projects. For example, differences between the processes of HIV consenting and counseling in San Diego and Los Angeles has required separate activation/education sessions with nursing staff regarding mandated requirements of the counseling/consenting process and the legal boundaries of their scope of practice. We have also found that further variations in training needs arise from differences in the mixtures of providers, i.e., the degree to which patient care is delivered by mid-level providers (nurse practitioners or physician assistants), medical residents, part-time physicians, contract employees and full time staff physicians. Furthermore, one facility only allowed trained HIV counselors, who were positioned in key clinics and substations, to order HIV tests or to perform pre- or post-test counseling. We needed to work with key stakeholders to change these policies. In addition, the rate of implementation of new technology varies. Thus while fully electronic consent for HIV testing is available [23], acceptance of paperless consent requires concomitant local policy changes. Similar issues pertain to the implementation of rapid testing for HIV infection; a procedure that has excellent patient acceptance in the VHA [12].

Variations in the prevalence of HIV risk factors: Although individual providers generally have a panel size that is normalized to the time they spend in clinic, the proportion of patients with HIV risk factors can vary dramatically. For example, a much higher proportion of patients trigger the HIV Testing Clinical Reminder in clinics that care for large numbers of persons with drug use histories or hepatitis C infection. Providers in such clinics warrant attention to ensure that they do not feel overwhelmed by the burden of work precipitated by responding to these reminders.

Issues related to use of the reminder: As per the FITT model, reminders require customization to the needs of providers [58]. We have found that providers benefit from having ready access to the specific factor(s) that trigger the HIV Testing Clinical Reminder for an individual patient. In addition, it is important that the factors that trigger the Reminder be as closely linked to actual risks of HIV infection as possible. In this regard, we have found that the triggers for a diagnosis of homelessness are sufficiently non-specific (i.e., loss of housing for a few days) as not to warrant inclusion in the reminder. Similarly, the process triggered by the Reminder needs to be of potential benefit to the patient. Thus exclusion of persons with a very limited life expectancy is appropriate. Based on these findings, we are adopting a revision of the Reminder that addresses these issues.

HIV Test ordering versus HIV test refusal: The location-specific variances in the ratio of HIV test orders to HIV test refusal was an unexpected finding. In response we are seeking to better understand the determinants of these behaviors. We anticipate that these will include provider comfort with HIV testing and site specific barriers to HIV testing. We will also determine whether particular demographic factors, HIV risk factors or physician factors are associated with patient refusal of HIV testing. Based on our findings we will design a broader campaign of provider activation, e.g., reminding providers of patient acceptance of HIV testing [37], and delivery system changes to alleviate this discrepancy.

**Next steps:**

After completing our 12 month QUERI step 4/phase 1 two-site pilot project, we will extend our work by performing a QUERI step 4/phase 2 small-scale, multi-site evaluation at all five VISN22 stations. This will allow us to conduct a formal multi-site formative and analytical evaluation, determine the sustainability of our project in our initial two-sites, determine the institutionalization of behaviors by our two-site pilot, and further refine and evaluate our intervention.

If the phase 2 results are favorable, we plan to study the refined intervention in multiple geographic regions (QUERI step 4/phase 3), prior to a national roll out of the intervention (QUERI step4/phase 4). Finally, QUERI steps 5 and 6 calls for documentation that best practices improve outcomes and that outcomes are associated with improved health-related quality of life. Thus of ultimate concern is whether increased rates of HIV screening and testing eventuates in increased rates of early HIV diagnosis, decreased HIV transmission and disease progression, and improved quality of life for HIV-infected and uninfected persons.

Competing interests: None

Authors' contributions: MBG drafted the manuscript. CB, TH, HA, TO, AG and SA participated in the design of the study. TH performed the statistical analysis. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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## **Figure Legends**

Figure 1: The HIV Testing Clinical Reminder is activated whenever a patient with HIV risk factors, who has not been previously tested for HIV has an encounter with a healthcare provider. The format of the Reminder is as pictured.

Figure 2: Sample Audit/Feedback letter

**Reminder Resolution: Screen for HIV Infection** [X]

This reminder is displayed when the medical record indicates that the patient has any one of the following: evidence of current or prior Hepatitis B or Hepatitis C infection, risk behaviors for Hepatitis C, prior STDs, or a diagnosis of a drug use disorder.

Order HIV Serology (consent required)

Previously tested for HIV

Refuses HIV testing

Patient unable to provide consent for HIV testing

---

EVALUATE FOR TESTING FOR OTHER CHRONIC VIRAL INFECTIONS

HEPATITIS B TESTING

Order Hepatitis B profile

Outside Hepatitis B surface antigen positive (carrier)  
Hep B surface Ag pos (HBsAg +)

Record Outside Result - Hep B seropos (immune or prior infection)  
Hepatitis B core antibody positive (HBcAb +) or  
Hepatitis B surface antibody positive (HbsAb +)

Record Outside Result - Hepatitis B seronegative  
Hep B core Ab neg and no prior immunization series

Hepatitis B Serology Not Indicated

Previously immunized for Hepatitis B

Hepatitis C Testing

Clear    Clinical Maint    Visit Info    < Back    Next >    Finish    Cancel

<No encounter information entered>

\* Indicates a Required Field

Figure 1

April 2006

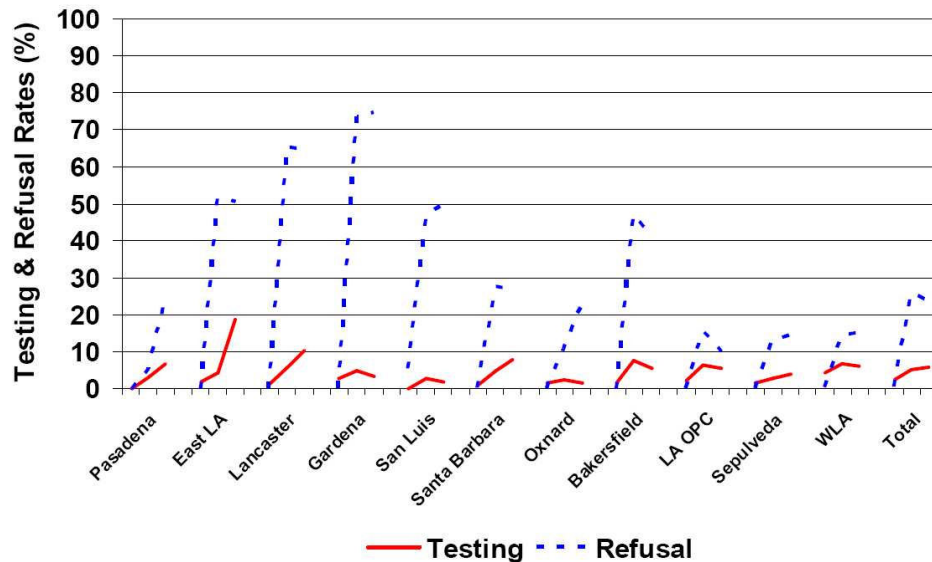
Dear GLA Healthcare Primary Care Provider,

The VA is evaluating the effectiveness of a clinical reminder-based intervention for increasing HIV testing rates for veterans at risk for HIV. This is in concert with the increased emphasis being placed on HIV testing by the CDC.

Since implementation of this intervention at GLA in August 2005, there has been a dramatic, documented increase in rate at which HIV testing is being considered in at-risk patients.

However the rate at which patients refuse HIV testing varies greatly across clinics and is far greater than the rate of actual HIV testing. The following figure compares the rates of testing and test refusal in the two quarters since implementation of this program.

### GLA Monthly HIV Testing & HIV Refusal Rates: Baseline, Quarter 1 & Quarter 2



Patient preference must, of course determine whether HIV testing is performed. However, we would like you to please continue to make actual HIV testing a priority among your at-risk patients. The success of this intervention is not possible without your continued contributions to this important health issue.

Please contact Henry Anaya PhD at [Henry.Anaya@va.gov](mailto:Henry.Anaya@va.gov) if you have any questions or concerns about this project.

Thanks for doing the right thing for your at-risk patients – and keep up the good work!

Matt Goetz, MD and Henry Anaya, PhD, for the QUERI-HIV VISN 22 HIV testing reminder evaluation team.

