

Should we alert emergency department patients to the costs of HIV screening? Findings from a working group of the New York State Department of Health AIDS Institute

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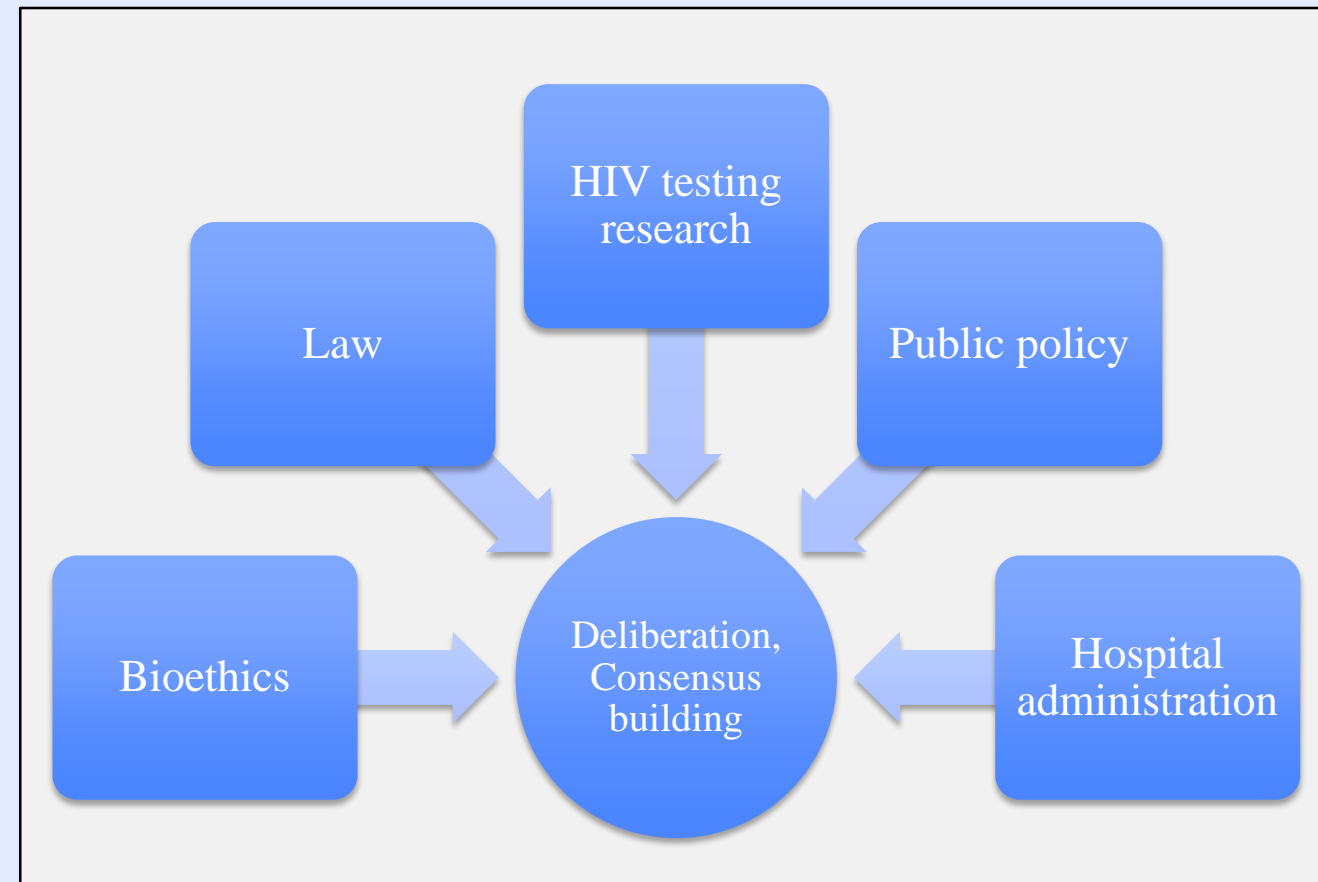
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Objectives

A conundrum exists regarding whether and how to notify emergency departments (EDs) patients about the costs of HIV screening. The objective of this study was to delineate the nuanced bioethical issues with both alerting and not alerting patients of the costs of HIV screening, and to find a palatable solution to this conundrum for all parties involved.

Methods

The AIDS Institute of the New York State Department of Health held a multidisciplinary working group to address this issue. Regional and national experts and stakeholders representing law, bioethics, HIV testing research, public policy, and hospital administration convened for a one-day working group. Participants deliberated regarding the issues; discussed potential solutions; and, finally, reached a consensus on solutions. The major points of the discussion were summarized by the primary author and then reviewed and accepted by secondary authors.



Results

Alerting patients of the costs of testing might leave patients under-informed to decide whether to accept the test. However, it was deemed inappropriate to alert patients of the costs of testing during the offering of the test, as this might dissuade patients from testing. Instead, participants reached a consensus that, if hospitals chose to discuss the costs of testing at all, they should do so when patients are alerted that they will be responsible for all of their ED costs, which is typically done when registering patients.

Conclusions

It was this working group's consensus that alerting patients of the costs of HIV testing should not be done while offering the HIV test. If hospitals feel inclined to alert patients of the costs of testing, they should do so when patients are alerted that they will be responsible for the rest of their ED bill. Public health officials may use these consensus recommendations when giving guidance as to whether or how to alert patients to the costs of HIV testing

The working group came to a consensus on the following points and recommendations

- Alerting ED patients to the costs of HIV screening may dissuade some patients from being tested.
- It is usual practice that ED patients are informed that they will be responsible for all of their ED visits costs when they sign the consent for medical treatment at registration. This general notification could serve as sufficient notification to patients that they will also be responsible for the costs of HIV screening.
- If EDs choose specifically and exceptionally to alert patients to the costs of HIV testing, then EDs should enact this practice at the time of general consent for medical care when they are notifying patients that the patient will be responsible for the rest of their ED procedures.
- This working group specifically recommends against alerting patients to the costs of testing during the HIV test offer, i.e. "Would you like an HIV test? Your HIV test may not be covered by your insurance."
- If ED patients choose not to accept HIV screening based on its costs, then patients should be informed about the opportunities to obtain free testing at designated sites.