FOCUS ON HEALTH CARE & TECHNOLOGY

Bethlehem's OraSure counts on in-home HIV test

By JOE MCDONALD
Special for Lehigh Valley Business

The annual national HIV testing day on June 27 will have special meaning for a Lehigh Valley-based company in the forefront of a breakthrough technology that allows people to self-test for the virus in the privacy of their home.

OraSure, with headquarters and manufacturing operations in South Bethlehem, won Food and Drug Administration approval last July to sell OraQuick, the first at-home, over-the-counter HIV test using oral fluids.

The kits, which sell for about $39, began hitting the shelves nationwide last fall in Walmart, CVS, RiteAid and Walgreens. Former basketball legend Magic Johnson, who was diagnosed with the HIV virus two decades ago, is a spokesman for the at-home test.

More than 100,000 kits have been sold since the product was rolled out, a company spokesperson said.

The test detects antibodies for the human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV, the virus that can lead to acquired immune deficiency syndrome, or AIDS. Users swab the upper or lower gum, place the swab in a vial and wait 20 to 40 minutes for the result to appear in a window.

If the result is positive for HIV, the test kit includes a number for people to call. The call center is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with trained representatives who can advise people on what steps they should take for follow-up care, such as seeing a doctor.

One of the riskier activities that can cause HIV is unprotected man-to-man sex, medical experts say, and it may take three months before the antibodies are detectable through the test, so follow-up tests are recommended after high-risk sex. Men also can become infected through unprotected sex with a woman who has the virus, and may not even know it.

Everyone who comes in contact with the virus will develop the antibodies at different rates. Ron Ticho, OraSure senior vice president of corporate communication, said the home self-testing kit can detect HIV “if used three months after a risk event.”

If someone tests earlier than three months after risky sex, Ticho said, “they should test again more frequently.”

As many as 50,000 new cases occur every year, giving the U.S. an HIV population of

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ORASURE

Manufacturer: OraSure Technologies, Bethlehem.
What: The first FDA-approved oral swab in-home test for HIV-1 and HIV-2. Unlike earlier tests, which health care professionals have used since 2004, it doesn’t require blood.
Cost: About $39. It is sold over-the-counter nationwide at Walmart, CVS, RiteAid and Walgreens.

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OPINION

LVHN, college pair up to train health care techs

By Judith Rex
Special to Lehigh Valley Business

LVHN employees who are hired for the technical partner role have a choice of two education tracks: one for the trainee with no prior health care experience and one for those who have had at least six months of recent hospital experience. Students on each track complete a specific number of hours based on their experience.

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In evaluations, 96 percent of students agreed that “simulation cases improve job performance and productivity.” This modality helps students build upon their knowledge, confidence level and increase their critical thinking skills.

For some trainees, the program is a stepping stone to other health care careers such as nursing or physician assistant. For others, it offers an opportunity to be the sole provider for his or her family. Trainees come from all walks of life – from different work, socioeconomic, cultural and educational backgrounds. They range in age from 18 to 55. Some are seeking new careers or second careers either because of a desire to work in health care or because of loss of employment. Their roles as technical partners will be crucial to patients’ outcomes.

“The partnership with NCC puts our trainees into a college setting with resources at their fingertips,” said Tiffany Epting, R.N., education specialist at LVHN. “It allows them to continue their educations. Many technical partner trainees, for example, come into the program interested in nursing careers. Many go on to enroll in NCC’s nursing program.”

The trainees’ differences in age, learning styles and prior health care and life experience pose a challenge to instructors.

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Judith Rex is the director of health care education at Northampton Community College’s Center for Business & Industry. For information on training in health care and other occupations, contact the college’s Center for Business and Industry at 610-332-8668 or email ddinam@northampton.edu.