Assessing Patient's belief on HIV testing before elective surgery: room for improvements in Switzerland!

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Background: In Switzerland no HIV test is performed without the patient's consent based on a Voluntary Counseling and Testing policy (VCT). We hypothesized that a substantial proportion of patients going through an elective surgery falsely believed that an HIV test was performed on a routine basis and that the lack of transmission of result was interpreted as being HIV negative.

Method: All patients with elective orthopedic surgery during 2007 were contacted by phone in 2008. A structured questionnaire assessed their belief about routine preoperative blood analysis (diabetes, coagulation function, HIV test and cholesterol level) as well as result awareness and interpretation. Variables included age and gender. Analysis were conducted using the software JMP 6.0.3.

Results: 1123 patients were included. 130 (12 %) were excluded (i.e. unreachable, unable to communicate on the phone, not operated). 993 completed the survey (89 %). Median age was 51 (16-79). 50 % were female. 376 (38 %) patients thought they had an HIV test performed before surgery but none of them had one. 298 (79 %) interpreted the absence of result as a negative HIV test. A predictive factor to believe an HIV test had been done was an age below 50 years old (45 % vs 33 % for 16-49 years old and 50-79 years old respectively, $p < 0.001$). No difference was observed between genders.

Conclusion: In Switzerland, nearly 40 % of the patients falsely thought an HIV test had been performed on a routine basis before surgery and were erroneously reassured about their HIV status. These results should either improve the information given to the patient regarding preoperative exams, or motivate public health policy to consider HIV opt-out screening instead of VCT strategy.

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Contents

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