

Call for general tests to replace 'doing it on the sly'

1pc of women in jail found HIV-positive

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About one per cent of women prisoners tested for HIV this year have been found positive.

But the disclosure that blood samples from various sources were being used to monitor HIV prevalence was criticised as testing "on the sly".

This year, six out of 500 blood samples from women prisoners have revealed an HIV-positive result.

The tests – taken at random and impossible to trace back to the patient – were done without the knowledge of the Correctional Services Department (CSD), a spokesman said.

Dr Lim Wei-ling, consultant medical microbiologist at the government virus unit, said the female HIV figure had increased over the past year because of overcrowding. It was now up to 179 per cent.

Prison staff admitted cells were "bursting at the seams."

Since the unit started the unlinked anonymous programme in 1991, a total of 13 inmates – nine women – had been found HIV positive.

"There's been a dramatic increase in the number of female prisoners coming in. Quite a large number are illegal immigrants – some might be involved in the commercial sex industry," said Dr Lim.

In light of the findings, she said: "There is voluntary HIV testing in prisons. It should be increased."

The CSD spokesman said no voluntary HIV tests had been taken by female prisoners; only three had been taken by male inmates.

"Inevitably they will bring HIV in with them. If someone knows we have HIV carriers, I think we should be informed," he said.

Prisoners' Friends Association chairman Pauline Deary said inmates should be made aware AIDS testing was available. "I'm not for doing it on the sly. I'm all for making it a general thing," she said.

"AIDS is going to spread like wildfire. But don't just

test randomly – test everybody, and let them know they are being tested."

Other groups – including pregnant women, tuberculosis patients and those attending methadone clinics – have also been tested.

The virus unit obtains the blood, saliva or urine samples from government clinics. The patients' samples are initially used to test for other ailments.

The results have shown a minimal prevalence of the HIV infection. A total of 22 out of 58,976 samples have been HIV-positive between 1991 and this August.

Dr Lim said the scheme was recommended by the World Health Organisation.