

1,500 unaware of AIDS test

By HELEN SIGNY

MORE than 1,500 people have been tested for AIDS in the past six months without their knowledge under a new anonymous screening scheme – but none of them have proved positive.

A Department of Health spokesman said the scheme was introduced last November to test the presence of the HIV virus in blood samples taken for other reasons from pregnant women, tuberculosis patients and newborn babies.

Unlinked anonymous testing is widely practised in other countries to monitor trends in the transmission of AIDS among certain populations.

Blood samples are taken with the patient's consent for other purposes and tested for AIDS without being linked to the patient's identity.

Patients who request an AIDS test are provided with results.

The head of Hongkong's AIDS Counselling and Health Education Unit, Dr Patrick Li Chung-ki, said the Government was now deciding on different sites to conduct anonymous testing, because it was not cost effective to test blood samples from groups who all proved negative.

But it might be repeated among pregnant women in future, he said.

Results released earlier this month of an unlinked anonymous screening scheme in London's St

Thomas's Hospital revealed one in 200 pregnant women were HIV positive.

A total of 18 out of 4,106 blood samples of pregnant women contained the HIV virus, representing a nine-fold increase in the past two years in London.

Because the tests were anonymous, neither the women nor medical staff knew who was infected or whether they gave birth to infected children.

The findings suggested that the women were more likely to have contracted AIDS through sexual intercourse rather than intravenous drug abuse, pointing to the increased heterosexual spread of HIV.

Britain introduced anonymous testing in January, 1990.

Dr Li said it was still too early to determine the prevalence of AIDS among pregnant women in the territory.

"At the moment, as far as existing information goes, we have very few infected women in the child bearing age," he said.

"Of course this is not to say it doesn't exist in Hongkong, but the chances of the rate of infection would be lower than that in Britain," he added.

Official government statistics indicate six women are carrying the HIV virus, which they contracted through blood transfusions before 1985 or from their sexual partner, while one female intravenous drug user has contracted full-blown AIDS.