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HEALTH CERTIFICATES FOR FOREIGNERS REGARDING COMMUNICABLE DISEASES

Health certificates that applicants for residence permits in Iceland must submit are issued on the basis of requirements from the health authorities on the one hand and on the other hand on requirements set by employers in relation to applications for work permits owing to special circumstances at the workplace in question.

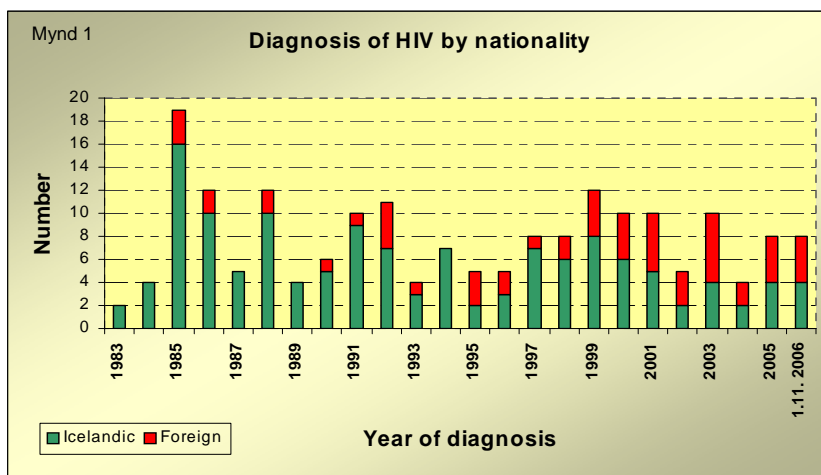
Official requirements for these health certificates are based on regulations regarding foreign nationals and statutes on the employment rights of foreigners in Iceland. They are set primarily to ensure that a person planning to immigrate to the country, whether for a short time or permanently, does not carry a communicable disease that may pose a health threat to the general public.

The Act on Communicable Diseases contains provisions authorising the institution of rules regarding medical examination of immigrants from regions where dangerous communicable diseases are endemic. These rules apply to people coming from countries outside the European Economic Area (EEA). That, however, does not prevent the possibility of setting such rules for people from an EEA country under special circumstances. Foreign nationals coming to Iceland can be broadly classified into three groups.

1. Tourists with permission to stay in Iceland for up to three months. Under

normal circumstances they are not required to submit health certificates as the period of their stay is too short for them to pose much threat to other people's health.

2. People who come to Iceland to study or for temporary employment (more than three months and less than two years, e.g.) must submit a health certificate. The health authorities require that these individuals do not carry any highly contagious diseases that pose a threat to people's health. At present, the main concern in this respect involves tuberculosis.



3. The third group consists of applicants for a permanent residence permit. In those cases it is no less important to consider serious communicable diseases that are not very contagious than the highly contagious ones. The reason is that the longer people afflicted with these diseases stay in the country the more likely they are to transmit their disease to other people.

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Diagnosing hepatitis B infection among immigrants coming to Iceland for a long-term stay is no less important than discovering HIV.

The communicable diseases demanding special monitoring among immigrants at present are HIV, hepatitis B and tuberculosis. The first two are dealt with in the present issue, while tuberculosis will be covered in the next issue of EPI-ICE.

HIV infection

At this point of the present year, eight people have been diagnosed as HIV positive, five men and three women. One individual has died of AIDS this year. These figures indicate that the HIV epidemic in Iceland is in balance and that the disease has become endemic.

A sizable portion of the individuals diagnosed as HIV positive are applicants for residence permits in Iceland (figure 1). Many of the HIV positive persons come from countries where HIV infection is widespread.

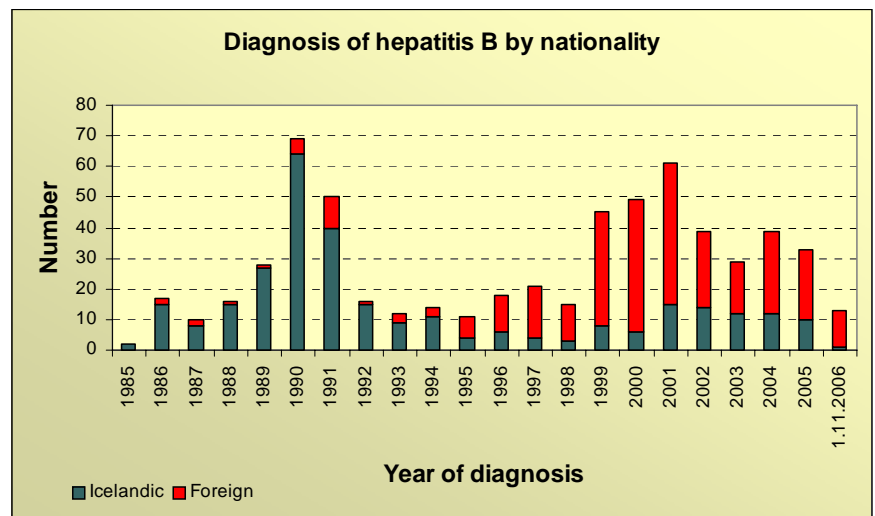
These facts show that HIV screening among immigrants to Iceland is important. It is important for those who intend to settle in the country to know about their HIV infection since it is a disease that can be treated and prevented from developing into AIDS. Similarly, it is important to treat the disease in order to reduce the possibility of transmission from mother to baby during birth. Finally, it is important to know of the disease in order to minimise the likelihood of its transmission to others, e.g. during sex.

On the other hand, it is a matter of opinion whether it serves any purpose to conduct an HIV test on those who enter the country for a limited stay, e.g. for studying or working as au-pair. It serves no purpose to initiate a costly, life-long treatment in Iceland, which may or may not be continued on return to the home country. It should also be kept in mind that HIV is not a highly contagious disease compared with some respiratory diseases such as tuberculosis.

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B, transmitted through a blood-borne pathogen, is widespread in many parts of the world. Chronic hepatitis B can cause cirrhosis as well as liver cell carcinoma, the probability of which increases the longer the infection has been present. Many countries have introduced vaccination against the disease, which is believed to provide life-long protection. In Iceland, the introduction of a general vaccination against hepatitis B, however, has not been deemed necessary because the disease is rare, apart from a hepatitis B outbreak among drug addicts in 1990–1992 (figure 2).

A large proportion of those diagnosed with the disease are applicants for residence permits, coming from parts of the world where the disease is endemic (Jónsdóttir G et al. *Læknabladid* 2006; 92: 669–73). The most common route of transmission in these countries is from mother to baby during or after birth.



Diagnosing hepatitis B infection among immigrants coming to Iceland for a long-term stay is no less important than discovering HIV. This is due to the fact that hepatitis B is in many cases curable and that individuals closely linked to a patient can be protected through vaccination. It is of particular importance to sever the route of transmission from a mother to baby by vaccinating the baby right at birth.