

Time For Action to prevent lives lost to viral hepatitis

An urgent call for government action to better equip half a million Australians living with viral hepatitis in combating life-threatening liver disease has been issued by peak health groups.

Calling for increased testing, improved access to liver check-ups and rapid access to new therapies, Hepatitis Australia and the leading state and territory hepatitis organisations warn that 1,000 Australian lives are lost each year due to hepatitis-related liver disease, and without urgent action, deaths from viral hepatitis will increase.

Speaking on World Hepatitis Day (28 July), Hepatitis Australia CEO, Helen Tyrrell said that Australia must never lose sight of the fact that hepatitis B and C are preventable, treatable liver health conditions.

“Chronic hepatitis B and C are liver-destroying viruses that affect half a million Australians – that’s one Australian for every 40 people, more people than the combined populations of Canberra and Darwin – yet only a fraction of these people are being monitored or treated,” she said.

“2015 has been a watershed year in the fight against viral hepatitis with a Federal Government inquiry into Hepatitis C, an advisory committee recommendation for the Government to subsidise new generation hepatitis C interferon-free therapies and improved access to hepatitis B medicines.

“However without urgent action, Australia risks squandering a huge opportunity to help half a million Australians living with chronic hepatitis B and C – that’s why we’re launching our Time For Action campaign today,” said Ms Tyrrell.

The Time For Action campaign aims to highlight the simple but positive actions individuals, communities, healthcare providers and governments can take to combat viral hepatitis.

With a call to ‘get tested, have a liver check-up, and ask about treatment’, the campaign aims to encourage Australians living with chronic hepatitis to protect their liver health. It also includes a call for governments to increase access to liver health services and new treatments and achieve the targets set in the National Strategies.

“It is essential that communities stand shoulder-to-shoulder with people living with hepatitis to ensure we prevent, test, monitor and treat hepatitis B and hepatitis C at every opportunity,” Ms Tyrrell said.

The Time For Action campaign coincides with the release of new research findings from people impacted by hepatitis B and C which identifies significant barriers to testing, liver check-ups and treatment, including negative community attitudes and stigma which deter many people from seeking medical help.

Respondents to the Galaxy Research survey expressed frustration about general practitioners' lack of knowledge and understanding of hepatitis and long waiting times to see specialists. Sixty-one per cent of those surveyed cited the prohibitive cost of new generation hepatitis C treatments not yet subsidised by the Federal Government as a major barrier to undergoing treatment.

Hepatitis Australia said that Australia needs to use all the tools at its disposal – from hepatitis B vaccination, needle and syringe programs, liver check-ups and antiviral therapy – to reduce the burden of chronic hepatitis B and C.

Pointing to survey respondents' comments that they wait the best part of a year for liver clinic appointments and are 'sick and tired of being told to hang in there' until their liver fails or they develop liver cancer, Ms Tyrrell said governments need to hear the message 'loud and clear' that it's time for action.

"Many Australians living with hepatitis B and C would like nothing more than to act and start treatment, but many have excessive waits for liver clinic appointments and the new generation of hepatitis C medicines remain out of reach. Now is the time for the Australian governments to set limits on liver clinic waiting times, support expansion of community based hepatitis health services and subsidise new hepatitis C treatments," Ms Tyrrell concluded.

For further information on #TimeForAction visit www.hepatitisaustralia.com

Media Contact: Fiona Beveridge (0405 902 826) or Dominique Kielt (0403 269 516) at Ethical Strategies – 02 8904 7335.

About hepatitis B

- Affecting more than 210,000 Australians, hepatitis B is transmitted through blood-to-blood contact or unprotected sexual contact. Without careful management and vaccination, a pregnant woman with chronic hepatitis B can transmit the virus to her baby.
- While vaccination rates are high among people born in Australia, they remain low among many people born overseas. Hepatitis B is endemic in Asia Pacific and Africa and in some remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- The best protection against hepatitis B is to get vaccinated. For those living with chronic hepatitis B, ongoing treatment and monitoring provides the best protection against the development of liver disease and liver cancer. However, only around five per cent of people with hepatitis B are treated each year.

About hepatitis C

- Affecting more than 230,000 Australians, hepatitis C is transmitted through blood-to-blood contact. Approximately 80 per cent of current infections and 90 per cent of new infections are thought to result from unsafe injecting drug use. Hepatitis C can also be contracted through unsafe tattooing and body piercing practices and from mother to baby.
- There is no vaccine to protect against hepatitis C but the infection can be treated and, in many cases, cured, but only one per cent of people with hepatitis C are treated each year.