

Viral hepatitis fuels nation's fast growing cancer killer: new research

Viral hepatitis is fuelling alarming rates of serious liver disease, with hepatitis B and hepatitis C now responsible for the majority of deaths from liver cancer and cirrhosis of the liver in Australia, according to new research.

Speaking at the National Hepatitis Health Promotion Conference in Sydney, Dr Ben Cowie from the Royal Melbourne Hospital said that liver cancer is the fastest increasing cause of cancer deaths in Australia and is being predominantly driven by chronic viral hepatitis.

Australian data from the Global Burden of Disease Study reveals that hepatitis B and hepatitis C are now responsible for 41 per cent and 24 per cent of the more than 1,000 liver cancer deaths respectively each year. Alcohol is responsible for 25 per cent of liver cancer deaths.

"Cirrhosis of the liver is also a major cause of liver disease in Australia, accounting for 1,600 deaths annually, with viral hepatitis accounting for 55 per cent of cirrhosis deaths each year," Dr Cowie said.

"The research also found that globally, 1.3 million people died from viral hepatitis in 2010 – a number comparable to the respective burdens of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria."

Despite more than 226,000 Australians living with hepatitis C, and a further 218,000 with hepatitis B, less than five per cent of these people are currently receiving treatment.

"Many Australians are unaware they are living with chronic viral hepatitis," Dr Cowie said.

Hepatitis B is transmitted through blood-to-blood, or unprotected sexual contact. 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 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.

CEO of Hepatitis Australia, Helen Tyrrell said: "Because the full effect of viral hepatitis is not seen for decades, there has been a tendency to turn a blind eye to its threat. These findings must force a complete rethink on how we tackle both hepatitis B and hepatitis C."

"In Australia, as at the global level, the political and public health focus on viral hepatitis has not been commensurate with the disease burden it generates.

"As well as preventing new cases, treatment of those living with viral hepatitis is essential if we are to combat the surge in life threatening liver disease," she added.

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For further information or to arrange an interview please contact Fiona Beveridge (0405 902 826) or Jay Pleass (0412 623 578) at Ethical Strategies on 02 8904 7300.