

National Hepatitis B and C Strategies must be 'catalyst for investment'

Half a million Australians are set to benefit from new National Strategies on viral hepatitis launched by the Federal Health Minister today, but only if investment is made available to turn aspirational targets into a reality for people living with, or at risk of, viral hepatitis.

This is according to Hepatitis Australia who has worked with the Government to develop the National Strategies and welcomes their launch, ahead of World Hepatitis Day on 28 July.

Hepatitis Australia's President, Terry Higgins said, "We welcome the commitment of the Federal, State and Territory Governments in launching the National Strategies, which should herald a brighter future for Australians at risk of, or living with, viral hepatitis.

"However, the real work starts today. Immediate investment and action in prevention and treatment programs is now urgently needed to address rising rates of new infections and appallingly low levels of treatment," he said.

Despite half a million Australians living with viral hepatitis,* very few receive treatment each year – less than 5 percent receive treatment for hepatitis B and 1 percent for hepatitis C.

Hepatitis damages the liver and without appropriate management and treatment silently progresses to liver cirrhosis (extensive scarring), liver cancer, and liver failure. Almost 1,000 Australians die from hepatitis-related liver cancer each year.

"Without urgent investment in rigorous treatment programs, Australia will continue to fail in its efforts to halt escalating rates of serious liver disease due to chronic hepatitis B or C," Hepatitis Australia's Acting CEO, Kevin Marriott said.

Despite having National Strategies for viral hepatitis in place for some years, the number of people affected by hepatitis B and hepatitis C has continued to grow year on year, highlighting the need for more investment in prevention.

"Australia needs to redouble its efforts and investment in prevention. We know what works – educating the community on the risks of infection and improving access to hepatitis B vaccinations and needle and syringe programs for vulnerable populations. It's now time for the investment to make it happen," Mr Marriott concluded.

* More than 233,000 Australians are living with chronic hepatitis C and a further 225,000 are living with chronic hepatitis B. (Data from the Kirby Institute).

For further information or to arrange an interview, please contact Fiona Beveridge (0405 902 826) at Ethical Strategies – 02 8904 7335.

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