

Efforts to prevent serious liver disease boosted by easier access to hepatitis B medicines

A major change in the way that hepatitis B medicines are prescribed and dispensed has been welcomed by the peak body representing the interests of more than 225,000 Australians living with the liver destroying virus.

From 1 July, people living with hepatitis B will be able to obtain their medicine from any pharmacy, regardless of whether the medicine has been prescribed in a hospital or community setting. This will eliminate the need for people to travel, often considerable distances, to hospital-based pharmacies.

Acting CEO of Hepatitis Australia Kevin Marriott said the change in prescribing and dispensing of hepatitis B medicines under the Highly Specialised Drugs program marked the “first significant change seen in the management and treatment for hepatitis B in many years”.

“This change marks a huge step forward in boosting treatment rates which remain lamentably low. Only around five per cent of people living with hepatitis B are currently treated,” he said.

Left untreated, hepatitis B leads to serious liver disease, including liver cancer, liver cirrhosis and liver failure, so making these medicines more accessible to communities is vital to save lives.

“It will now be easier for people living with the virus to access treatment, especially people living in rural and remote areas, along with people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities who will now be able to obtain medicine from health care providers they deem culturally relevant,” Mr Marriott said.

He stressed that governments and communities need to work together to ensure healthcare professionals and communities understand what these important changes mean, “so that all people living with hepatitis B can benefit from improved access to medicines.”

Hepatitis Australia said it will continue to call for governments to support increased diagnosis for hepatitis B and consistent access nationally to free hepatitis B vaccination for all adolescents and adults at higher risk.

About Hepatitis B

- Treatment rates for hepatitis B in Australia have remained low and currently sit at around 5%. The National Hepatitis B Strategy 2014-2017 includes a target to increase the proportion of people accessing treatment for hepatitis B to 15%. The change in prescribing and dispensing rules will make this target more achievable.
- People born overseas in areas endemic for hepatitis B, including the Asia-Pacific region and Africa, together with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, are estimated to represent approximately two-thirds of those living with chronic hepatitis B in Australia.

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If you are living with hepatitis B, please call the National Infoline on 1300 437 222