



**Leading Australia
towards the elimination of viral hepatitis**

Australian Federal Election 2016



About Hepatitis Australia

Our vision is an end to hepatitis B and hepatitis C in Australia.

Our mission is to lead an effective national community response to hepatitis B and hepatitis C in Australia.

Our members are the eight state and territory hepatitis organisations: Hepatitis ACT; Hepatitis NSW; Hepatitis Queensland; Hepatitis SA; Hepatitis Victoria; Hepatitis WA; Northern Territory AIDS and Hepatitis Council and, Tasmanian Council on AIDS, Hepatitis and Related Diseases.

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Introduction

As the peak community hepatitis organisation, Hepatitis Australia believes there are three areas for an incoming Government to focus on in relation to viral hepatitis. These include sustaining an effective partnership approach, reducing stigma by speaking out, and bringing attention to the prevention and management of viral hepatitis in Australia's prisons.

Australia has been a world leader in responding to the major blood-borne viruses, including hepatitis B virus (HBV), hepatitis C virus (HCV), and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Recently, Hepatitis Australia played a pivotal role in ensuring publicly-funded access to new generation medicines for the treatment of HCV; Australia's first step towards eliminating viral hepatitis. The public funding of new direct-acting antiviral medicines through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) has put Australia back in the global spotlight as a leader in access to these new medicines for all people living with hepatitis C. This has set us on the path to eliminating viral hepatitis. We need to stay on this path, but there is much more to do.

Half-a-million Australians are living with either HBV or HCV as a chronic infection. The impact of chronic conditions such as viral hepatitis extends beyond the individual to their families and friends, and limits the capacity of people to participate fully in the community. Hepatitis Australia believes people living with viral hepatitis, as well as their family and friends are interested in what a future Australian Government will do to support them, and how it will sustain the Australian response to viral hepatitis.

The following information is provided to draw attention to these key areas. It asks how the elected Australian Government will respond to viral hepatitis during the next term of Government.

Hepatitis Australia asks that in the lead up to the 2016 Federal Election, each of the political parties:

- 1. State their commitment to sustaining and supporting the national partnership approach to HBV and HCV, as well as other blood-borne viruses.**
- 2. Commit to making public statements on World Hepatitis Day (28 July) highlighting the national response to viral hepatitis, supporting the WHO campaign, and assisting to break down stigma.**
- 3. Commit to raising the issue of hepatitis C in prisons, and the establishment of national standards in prison health delivery, including prevention, management and treatment of viral hepatitis as part of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Health Council process.**

1. The partnership approach to blood-borne viruses

Background

Over four decades ago, Australia led the world in recognising that governments, clinicians, researchers and most importantly, the affected community, had to work in an effective partnership to tackle the public health threat of HIV. The success of that partnership approach is now enshrined in our suite of National Strategies and listed as a guiding principle which underpins Australia's response to all blood-borne viruses, including HBV and HCV.

This highly successful partnership approach has been under threat in recent years due to changes to the federal funding environment. While that threat has dissipated to some extent, it is imperative that the national partnership approach to blood-borne viruses is nurtured over the life of the next Federal Government.

The Hepatitis Australia Position

In line with the National Strategies, Hepatitis Australia believes that the next Australian Government must commit to leadership of an effective national partnership approach in the response to blood-borne viruses, which includes the following measures:

- consultation with all community partners including Hepatitis Australia
- respectful and meaningful dialogue between all parties
- facilitation of cooperative efforts across all aspects of the response
- action and resources to achieve the goals of the National Strategies.

The 2016 Federal Election is an opportune time for all political parties to:

- **State their commitment to sustaining and supporting the national partnership approach to HBV and HCV as well as other blood-borne viruses.**

2. A public voice against hepatitis-related stigma.

Background

Many people with HCV continue to experience stigma and discrimination in their daily life, limiting their relationships, access to healthcare and employment.

World Hepatitis Day is one of only a handful of disease-specific world health days endorsed by the World Health Organization. It provides a key opportunity for the Australian Government to highlight viral hepatitis, educate the public, and help to reduce stigma and discrimination by framing viral hepatitis as a health condition affecting ordinary Australians that can be prevented, managed and treated.

Despite being invited to participate, each Health Minister and Australian Government over the last five years has not issued any public statement for World Hepatitis Day, yet in contrast, Ministerial media releases and/or public statements for World AIDS Day have been the norm.

The Hepatitis Australia Position

It is vital that the elected Australian Government demonstrates support for people living with viral hepatitis by speaking out on key occasions such as World Hepatitis Day. As a minimum, this will support the Australian response to:

- create greater public awareness about viral hepatitis
- challenge the stigma faced by people living with HBV and HCV
- strengthen the momentum towards elimination of viral hepatitis.

The 2016 Federal Election is an opportune time for all political parties to:

- **Commit to making public statements on World Hepatitis Day (28 July), highlighting and supporting the national response to viral hepatitis and assisting to break down stigma.**

3. The hepatitis crisis in Australian prisons

Background

Current prison settings provide a high-risk environment for the transmission of HBV and HCV. Many people in prison have contracted HBV or HCV prior to entering prison and in some cases are unaware of their infection. The sharing of unsterile injecting equipment, barbering tools, unsafe tattooing and unprotected sex all contribute to the spread of blood-borne viruses within prisons in every jurisdiction.

In 2015, Australia's response to HCV in prisons was in the spotlight as part of the Parliamentary Inquiry into Hepatitis C in Australia. A special sitting of the House of Representatives Committee on Health was dedicated to this subject. This enabled experts and organisations such as Hepatitis Australia to voice their concerns about Australia's poor response to HCV and other blood-borne viruses in prisons.

The report from the Committee on Health, *The Silent Disease: Inquiry into Hepatitis C in Australia* included several recommendations calling on the Australian Government and the State and Territory Governments to work together to address blood-borne viruses in prisons. To date, no Government response to the Parliamentary report has been issued.

The Hepatitis Australia Position

Attempts to introduce effective prevention strategies in prisons have largely failed. Misconceptions about the risk to prison staff, ill-informed opposition by trade union bodies and lack of sustained political support for the needed changes have prevailed, despite the evidence. There is no nationally consistent approach to the prevention, management and treatment of HBV or HCV in Australia's prisons.

Preventing and treating viral hepatitis in the prison environment will have benefits beyond the prison setting, as it can lead to greater awareness and less likelihood of further transmissions in the community.

It is important that the Australian Government takes a lead role in establishing an effective, coordinated national response to viral hepatitis in prisons. Such action should focus on:

- establishing a national coordinated approach to prison health delivery, including prevention, management and treatment of viral hepatitis
- the development of a minimum national data set to enable the monitoring of viral hepatitis in prisons.

The 2016 Federal Election is an opportune time for all political parties to:

- **Commit to raising the issue of HCV in prisons, and the establishment of national standards in prison health delivery, including prevention, management and treatment of viral hepatitis as part of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Health Council process.**