Prospect of elimination at hand, but barriers to treatment must be overcome

Despite the availability of antiviral medicine that can cure all forms of hepatitis C, more effort is required to reconnect people living with the liver-destroying virus with medical care.

Speaking on World Hepatitis Day (28 July), CEO of Hepatitis Australia Helen Tyrrell warned that “access to hepatitis C cures on the PBS is only part of the solution”.

“Affordable access to curative therapies is critical but the real world value of these medical miracles is entirely reliant on people being aware of them and accessing them,” she said.

“We need more GPs, in particular, talking to people about hepatitis C and feeling confident prescribing the appropriate treatment.”

New data from the Kirby Institute reveals that almost 40,000 people have commenced treatment with new hepatitis C antivirals since the initial PBS listing in March 2016.

“The early wave of motivated and engaged people who sought treatment exceeded all expectations, but there has been a sharp decline since and the real challenge is now reaching the remaining 200,000 Australians living with hepatitis C,” Ms Tyrrell said.

“Lack of awareness and the stigma that surrounds the virus must be addressed and we must make it easy for everyone to access treatment. This is critical if we are to achieve the goal of eliminating hepatitis C by 2030,” she said.

“It is vital that the message goes out loud and clear that there are remarkable new cures for hepatitis C that GPs can prescribe.”

Ms Tyrrell also noted that, “While the new hepatitis C cures are amazing we are still waiting for a similar miracle treatment for hepatitis B, which has replaced hepatitis C as the most prevalent blood-borne virus in Australia”.

At the end of 2015 there were an estimated 232,000 people living with chronic hepatitis B, one-in-three of these people remain unaware they have the virus and may be silently progressing towards serious liver disease, including liver cancer.

“Efforts to prevent, diagnose and treat hepatitis B lag far behind those of hepatitis C. We must focus on ensuring vaccination coverage is extended and everyone already living with chronic hepatitis B is diagnosed and carefully monitored at least once a year. We must also triple the number of people accessing hepatitis B anti-viral treatments to protect them against the development of liver cancer, which is increasingly common in Australia,” Ms Tyrrell said.

People who know they are living with hepatitis B or hepatitis C are encouraged to seek a liver check-up and discuss treatment options with their doctor.

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