Great progress on viral hepatitis but still too early to celebrate

The number of Australians living with hepatitis C and advanced liver disease has fallen for the first time in ten years but elimination of the virus remains uncertain, according to campaigners.

Published today, the Kirby Institute’s latest Annual Surveillance Report on HIV, viral hepatitis and sexually transmissible Infections in Australia reveals that between March and December 2016, an estimated 30,343 people were cured of hepatitis C following treatment with new direct acting antiviral therapy.

Responding to the Kirby Institute’s report, Hepatitis Australia’s Acting CEO Kevin Marriott said that Australia needs to capitalise on this early success to ensure all Australians impacted by viral hepatitis have access to effective treatment and care.

“As incredible as it is that more than 30,000 Australians have been treated for hepatitis C, there are still 200,000 Australians living with the virus who are at risk of serious liver disease,” he said.

“Australia is a leader in the global response to hepatitis C, but even with cures readily available, the elimination of hepatitis C as a public health threat by 2030 is not guaranteed.

“In 2017, demand for these medical miracles has fallen sharply. A concerted effort is needed to break down the barriers to more Australians speaking to their GP about hepatitis C treatment.”

The Kirby data also reveals that over the past five years hepatitis B diagnoses have declined by 27 per cent in people aged less than 25 years, largely due to infant and adolescent vaccination programs.

Mr Marriott said that the success of hepatitis B vaccination is good news, but that Australia is still failing to effectively diagnose and treat hepatitis B.

Only 63 per cent of the estimated 230,000 people living with chronic hepatitis B in Australia have been diagnosed, and only a third are having their hepatitis B regularly monitored.

“We urge Australians who know they are living with hepatitis B or hepatitis C to seek a liver check-up and discuss treatment options with their doctor,” said Mr Marriott.

Hepatitis Australia has published a roadmap to eliminating viral hepatitis in Australia, available at www.hepatitisaustralia.com National Infoline: 1800 437 222