Thousands missing out on hep C cures: Australians urged to ‘Just Ask’

The number of Australians receiving breakthrough antiviral therapy to cure hepatitis C has sharply declined, prompting urgent appeals for more Australians living with the virus to come forward to be cured.

A new analysis released by Hepatitis Australia, ahead of World Hepatitis Day on 28 July, identifies three phases to the uptake of hepatitis C cures since they received government funding in March 2016:

- **High uptake**: average of 3,400 initiations per month from March to November 2016
- **Stable Uptake**: average of 1,800 initiations per month from December 2016 to November 2017
- **Low Uptake**: average of 1,300 initiations per month since December 2017.

Around 60,000 Australians have been cured of hepatitis C since these medicines were first added to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme in 2016, however it is estimated that more than 170,000 Australians are still living with the virus.

Without urgent action to identify people with hepatitis C, they remain at increased risk of serious liver disease, including liver failure, liver cirrhosis, liver cancer and possible death.

Hepatitis Australia CEO Helen Tyrrell said that the alarming drop in treatment “needs to be urgently addressed to prevent more people with the virus progressing to serious liver disease”.

“The initial record numbers of Australians being cured of hepatitis C was fantastic news, but the majority of people with the virus are still missing out on life-saving treatment,” she said.

In contrast to the old interferon therapies, the new breakthrough hepatitis C cures consist of daily tablets taken for around 8-12 weeks, with few side-effects, which cure 95 per cent of people.

New hepatitis C cures can now be prescribed by GPs, avoiding long waits at liver clinics. However, while GP prescribing is working well in some pockets of the country, this needs to increase substantially.

Dr Anne Balcomb who has cured many people with hepatitis C in her general practice said, “Hepatitis C needs to be seen as part of the core business of GPs, as much the responsibility of GPs as monitoring blood pressure or treating diabetes.”

“The new treatments are so easy to administer – one pill a day for as little as 8 or 12 weeks – so there is no need for GPs to refer most people with hepatitis C to specialists,” she said.

“It is impossible to tell if someone is living with hepatitis C without asking them if they have ever been diagnosed or doing a simple test, so GPs need to proactively ask people about hepatitis C,” Dr Balcomb added.

Hepatitis Australia said it is vital that people who know they are living with hepatitis C speak to their doctor or call the national infoline to ensure they are not missing out on new cures.
“People who are living with hepatitis C cannot tell if their liver health is deteriorating as there are few symptoms, other than tiredness, so please start a conversation with your doctor or call our helpline to make sure you benefit from new cures,” Ms Tyrrell said.

Jo Sloan who describes being cured of hepatitis C as “life-saving”, said that many people living with the virus “either don’t know how amazing the cures are, or they don’t realise that hepatitis C can kill them if you don’t get rid of it”.

“To me, it’s a no-brainer. Why live with a virus that destroys your liver when you can be free of hep C in a matter of weeks?”

As part of World Hepatitis Day on July 28, Hepatitis Australia is releasing a video likening not benefiting from treatment advances for hepatitis C to turning down a golden ticket, with the campaign theme “Why miss out? Just Ask”. Supporters are encouraged to share the video with the hashtags #whymissout #HepFreeAus.

Hepatitis Australia has also launched the Test, Cure, Live campaign to prompt people with hepatitis C to seek treatment. The campaign includes a podcast series #MakingHepatitisCHistory, which features people sharing their stories of being cured of hepatitis C.

"The Federal Government was rightly lauded for its historic commitment to eliminate hepatitis C in Australia by 2030, but we need people with the virus to come forward to protect themselves from the serious consequences of hepatitis C,” concluded Ms Tyrrell.

If you are living with hepatitis C or would like more information, visit www.worldhepatitisday.org.au National Infoline 1800 437 222

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