Hepatitis Australia welcomes The Australian Greens commitment to viral hepatitis helping to end liver cancer deaths.

CEO of Hepatitis Australia, Helen Tyrrell today welcomed the commitment of The Australian Greens to support an immediate increase in funding to help achieve the National Strategy targets for hepatitis B and hepatitis C and avoid lives lost to liver cancer.

Australia was the first country in the world to provide universal access to the cures for hepatitis C and allow general practitioners to prescribe the medicines. This resulted in a large number of people being cured initially, however uptake slowed subsequently and it is now at a suboptimal level. At the Hepatitis C Stakeholder Meeting in late 2018 the current trend was noted and a statement made that “higher initiation rates (approximately 19,000 per annum) are likely required to meet National Hepatitis C Strategy targets for 2022”.

A key issue is the lack of attention that has been given to the transition of hepatitis C prescribing from hospital specialists to primary care providers. In 2018 only 8% (3,493) of all General Practitioners (GPs) prescribed hepatitis C treatment. Measures to support a faster transition to prescribing in primary care and embedding it as the norm are urgently required. These drugs are not in clinical trial, they are a clinically proven cure, without which, people with hepatitis C risk ongoing liver damage, liver cancer and death.

Hepatitis Australia is pleased to have received full support from The Australian Greens for our call to address gaps in hepatitis treatment and care through additional funding for community awareness and engagement and a suite of education and time-limited incentives to support increased testing and treatment in primary care.

More than 2,000 Australians died from complications of hepatitis, including liver cancer, in 2016 and 2017 alone. It is commitment to action such as that from the Australian Greens that will help Australia quickly end this unacceptable death rate and reach our elimination goals.

Stigma and misunderstanding mean many Australians are unnecessarily at risk of developing life threatening complications from hepatitis. Hepatitis often has few symptoms for many years despite causing liver damage which increases over time. A large majority of people living with hepatitis C have no current risk factors and may be getting their diabetes medications, their cholesterol medications and their flu shots in primary care, but are not being tested and treated for a disease that they acquired decades ago, which can be cured. The elimination of hepatitis C is not an achievable

1 Direction-acting Antivirals for Hepatitis C Stakeholder Meeting Outcome Statement
3 Hepatitis Australia, Leading the National Response to Viral Hepatitis, Australian Federal Election 2019
goal unless all people at risk of, or living with the virus are offered a test and supported to commence treatment.

The substantial investment that has already occurred to make hepatitis C cures as well as hepatitis B vaccination & treatment affordable to Australians is of no use unless it actually reaches the people that stand to benefit. The major lesson over the last few years is that the well-informed will come forward to take advantage of what Australia has on offer, but others need a much greater level of assistance to obtain the best health outcomes. Our progress towards elimination of hepatitis B and hepatitis C has stalled. In order to make Australia a leader in public health prevention, treatment and cure once again investment is required.

Hepatitis Australia calls on all parties and independent candidates standing for election to take a bipartisan approach and join the Australian Greens in committing to eliminating these diseases once and for all.

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