

The Government must act now to eradicate Hepatitis C

Australia can be the first country to eradicate hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is an infectious disease that mainly affects the liver. Left untreated, it can lead to liver cirrhosis, liver cancer, and ultimately deathⁱ. Hepatitis C was first discovered in the 1970s but until 1989 it was merely known as non A or B hepatitisⁱⁱ. Thanks to new medicines that can cure most peopleⁱⁱⁱ of the disease, Australia now has the ability to eradicate hepatitis C just 25 years after it was named.

Hepatitis C is a blood borne virus meaning it is transmitted by exposure to contaminated blood. In Australia, it is most often contracted by the sharing of needles by intravenous drug users although most of these people no longer use intravenous drugs. An estimated 230,000 Australians currently live with hepatitis C and, compared with other countries, Australia has a high diagnosis rate with 180,000 of those infected aware that they have the disease^{iv}.

MSD commissioned research to learn more about the people in Australia living with hepatitis C. It found that the majority of those aware that they had the disease fell into the "General Community" category being neither currently injecting drug users nor people attending methadone clinics. Around 100,000 of the 180,000 people who know they have hepatitis C fall into this category^v.

The number of Australians with hepatitis C continues to grow each year because fewer people are being treated for the disease than are being infected. Less than 1% of people with hepatitis C are treated each year despite medicines that can effectively cure the disease^{iv}.

The longer a person remains untreated the greater the likelihood they will experience irreversible damage to their liver. According to the Fourth National Hepatitis C Strategy, hepatitis C is the most common underlying cause in all liver transplants in Australia.

New hepatitis C medicines will cure most patientsⁱⁱ

Up until recently, people seeking treatment received interferon and ribavirin. This course of treatment took up to 48 weeks and had a cure rate of around 50%. It also had significant side effects that needed to be carefully managed.

A new wave of medicines offer people living with hepatitis C much higher cure rates in a shorter amount of time with fewer side effects. With cure rates greater than 90% most people who undergo these new treatments will be free of the disease. Furthermore, these all-oral treatments will replace the need to both take tablets and undergo a weekly injection. They are also more tolerable with far fewer and less severe side effects than existing medicines.

Newer treatments will further improve cure rates and will be even more tolerable. These, if combined with new treatment pathways, open up the opportunity to eradicate hepatitis C in Australia. There is evidence that investment in hepatitis C medicines is well spent. A report by Boston Consulting Group showed that for every dollar spent on treating hepatitis C in Australia, there are four more being spent on the consequences of not treating^{vi}.

Australia can increase treatment of hepatitis C dramatically^v

Australia has one of the highest diagnoses rates in the world when it comes to hepatitis C but one of the lowest treatment rates. The fewer than 2,000 people undergoing hepatitis C treatment each year falls well short of the 10,000 people who are newly infected with the disease annually.

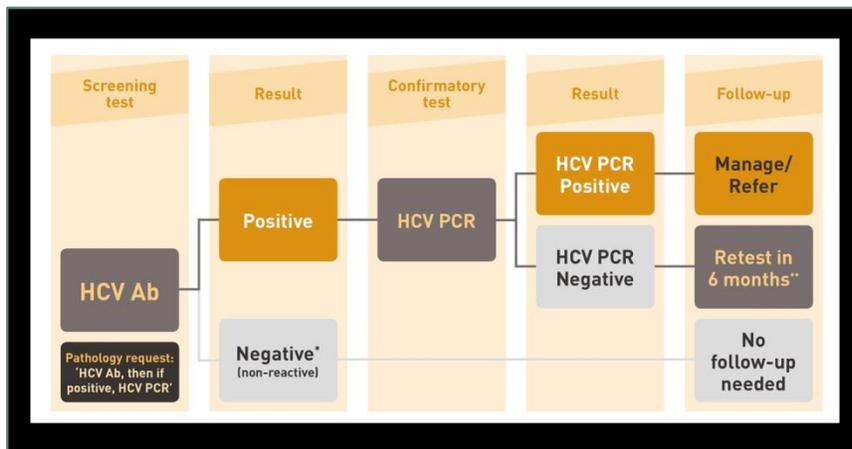
There are two main reasons why so few Australians are being treated for their hepatitis C:

1. Doctors and patients are waiting for the newer medicines
2. There exists a disconnect between General Practice surgeries and specialist liver clinics

MSD's research showed that only 4-9% of those who have been diagnosed with hepatitis C were referred to a liver clinic by their GP.

General Practitioners will play a leading role in increasing treatment

In 2011, MSD implemented the "Fight Hep C" campaign. This non-promotional campaign involved nurses visiting GPs located near liver clinics and educating them about hepatitis C testing and best-practice referral pathways (see below). The campaign succeeded in increasing annual referrals across the country from just under 6,000 in 2011 to more than 8,500 in 2014^v.



In its first two years the campaign resulted in an overall increase in the number of people undergoing treatment for chronic hepatitis C. As simpler, safer therapies become available, campaigns such as "Fight Hep C" will be critical to help people with hepatitis C and their doctors make informed decisions about their treatment options.

While liver clinics will continue to play the leading role in managing hepatitis C, as clinicians gain more experience with the new medicines there will be the opportunity for community-based "specialists" like clinicians in opioid substitution clinics and Section 100 GPs to also play a role in treating the disease.

Australia is a global leader in responding to infectious disease

Australia has a good track record when it comes to managing infectious diseases. In the 1980s, Australian State and Commonwealth Governments quickly recognised the threat that HIV posed to the community and acted swiftly and meaningfully to manage the pandemic. Public awareness campaigns and the promotion of prevention have been credited as two of the reasons why Australia has one of the lowest HIV rates in the world.

The Australian Government once again has the opportunity to show leadership on public health matters and act now to eradicate hepatitis C. As with the work done in the HIV space, this will require investment, coordination and collaboration with all stakeholders.

The Government should take the following actions to eradicate hepatitis C in Australia:

1. List new hepatitis C medicines
2. Fund a GP education and referral program
3. Explore opportunities for community based treatment

ⁱ <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/c/cfaq.htm#cFAQ11>

ⁱⁱ http://hcvadvocate.org/hepatitis/factsheets_pdf/Brief_History_HCV.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.hepatitisaustralia.com/treatment-for-hep-c/> (viewed 27/2/2015)

^{iv} <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ohp-bbvs-hepc>

^v Data on file

^{vi} http://www.hepatitisaustralia.com/s/The-Economic-Impact-of-Hepatitis-C-in-Australia_FINAL.pdf