

## MEDIA RELEASE

### Steep declines in hepatitis C among people who inject drugs show Australia's treatment for all approach is working

**Under strict embargo until 00.01AM AEST, Thursday 25 July 2019**

**(SYDNEY, Thursday 25 July 2019)** Hepatitis C has declined by a staggering 60% among people who inject drugs since new hepatitis C cures were made available through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) in 2016, according to a new report released today by the Kirby Institute at UNSW Sydney.

The report, published in the lead-up to [World Hepatitis Day](#) this Sunday, analyses data from people who inject drugs attending Australia's Needle Syringe Programs (NSP). Among this population, the proportion of people living with hepatitis C in 2018 was one in five, down from one in two in 2015 before the treatments were made available.

Researchers from the Kirby Institute believe that these unprecedented reductions are due to high uptake of new hepatitis C treatments and are an early indicator for reductions in transmission of hepatitis C Australia-wide.

"People who inject drugs are the major population at risk of hepatitis C in Australia, and thanks to forward-thinking and inclusive leadership from the Federal Government, people are able to access the cures at a low cost through the PBS," said Dr Jenny Iversen, lead author of the report. "Since these new treatments were added to the PBS, our report shows the number of people attending NSPs ever treated for hepatitis C has increased from 11% to 55%."

As part of this report, researchers have also monitored the impact of the new treatments on prevalence of hepatitis C. "Our results show that there are significantly less people living with hepatitis C, but also, that the risk of transmitting hepatitis C has more than halved since the introduction of the new treatments," said Dr Iversen.

Australia was one of the first countries in the world to offer hepatitis C treatments at a low cost to all people living with the illness. Professor Greg Dore, head of the Kirby Institute's Viral Hepatitis Clinical Research Program said that it's this approach that could make Australia the first country in the world to eliminate hepatitis C.

"Many countries are looking to Australia as the ideal setting to achieve hepatitis C elimination," he said. "The focus on providing access to all, with more than 70,000 people now cured, together with specific initiatives for marginalised populations, means that people who inject drugs are equal recipients of these amazing advances."

Melanie Walker, CEO of the Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL), said that these results demonstrate the vital importance of the Kirby Institute's internationally recognised Australian Needle and Syringe Program Survey in monitoring

progress towards elimination of hepatitis C, and called for the programs to be extended to include custodial settings.

“The new treatments are clearly already having a big impact, but the focus on priority populations and prevention, particularly for those in custodial settings, must now be enhanced if we are to achieve the elimination of hepatitis C in Australia,” she said.

## **ENDS**

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### **ABOUT THE REPORT**

The Australian Needle and Syringe Program Survey (ANSPS) provides serial point prevalence estimates of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibodies and sexual and injecting risk behaviour among people who inject drugs (PWID) in Australia. Conducted annually over a one-two week period in October, all clients attending participating needle and syringe program (NSP) services are invited to complete a brief, anonymous questionnaire and to provide a capillary blood sample for HIV and HCV antibody testing.

### **ABOUT THE AUSTRALASIAN VIRAL HEPATITIS ELIMINATION CONFERENCE**

The [Australasian Viral Hepatitis Elimination Conference \(AVHEC\) 2019](#) is organised by ASHM and will be held at the Novotel Sydney Brighton Beach on 5-6 August. Centring on the theme ‘Building momentum towards elimination of hepatitis B and C in Australasia’, the conference brings together experts from our region to evaluate progress, improve support, strengthen partnerships, and encourage further development of testing and treatment initiatives to achieve elimination of viral hepatitis.

### **ABOUT THE KIRBY INSTITUTE**

The [Kirby Institute](#) is a leading global research institute dedicated to the prevention, treatment and cure of infectious diseases. Established in response to the HIV epidemic, the Institute now contributes to knowledge on a broad range of diseases, including viral hepatitis and sexually transmissible infections. The Kirby Institute’s primary work relates to the coordination of national surveillance programs, population health and epidemiological research, clinical and behavioural research and clinical trials. Research projects are conducted in partnership with communities most affected by epidemics. Together we implement trials of behavioural and biomedical interventions designed to prevent the spread of infectious diseases in vulnerable populations.