

Australia sees groundbreaking roll-out of hep C cure, but enhanced prevention efforts still needed to drive down new infections

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Australia is on track to cure more people of hepatitis C in 2016 alone than in the past 20 years, according to a new report from the Kirby Institute at UNSW Australia.

The report, released today at the 10th Australasian Viral Hepatitis 2016 Conference, found an estimated 227 306 people were living with chronic hepatitis C infection in Australia in 2015, and the number of people with cirrhosis (permanent scarring of the liver) had doubled over a decade due to an ageing population with hepatitis C and poor uptake and outcomes from previous interferon-based treatments. Only 22% of people living with hepatitis C at the end of 2015 had ever received treatment.

However, following the Australian Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) listing of new oral highly curative (more than 90%) direct-acting antiviral treatments for hepatitis C on 1 March 2016, an estimated 26,360 people have received treatment. This puts Australia on track to cure more people of hepatitis C in 2016 alone than in the past two decades.

There has been particularly strong uptake of the new treatment among people with advanced liver disease. An estimated 60% of people with cirrhosis have been treated with new HCV treatments.

“Australia is witnessing the most rapid uptake of new treatments seen anywhere in the world, thanks to the unique approach we have taken in making the medicines available without restriction,” said Professor Gregory Dore from the Kirby Institute.

The report also found the rate of hepatitis C diagnosis in Australia has remained stable over the last five years, however diagnoses rates in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population have increased by 43% over the same period. The rate in 2015 was four times greater than in the non-Indigenous population.

Professor Dore said these findings underscore the need for increased focus on strategies to prevent infections from occurring, such as providing greater access to clean needles and syringes and drug dependency treatment for people who inject drugs and expanding coverage of these strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who inject drugs.

The 2015 report also provides a snapshot of hepatitis B in Australia.

There were an estimated 232 600 people living with chronic hepatitis B infection in Australia in 2015, yet only 62% of those people had been diagnosed and only 6% had ever received treatment.

“Effective treatments for hepatitis B have been available in Australia for a long time, but we need to scale up diagnosis and treatment of people with chronic hepatitis B infection in order to achieve the national targets of 80% diagnosed and 15% on treatment,” said Professor Dore.

“Meeting these targets will require enhanced and culturally specific strategies to reach those populations most affected by hepatitis B in Australia, including people from Asia and the Pacific and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who together account for almost half of those living with hepatitis B. Other priority populations include men who have sex with men engaged in high risk sexual activity and people who inject drugs.”

Professor Greg Dore said that strategies to prevent people from acquiring hepatitis B are working well because of Australia’s vaccination program.

In the past ten years there has been a 51% decline in hepatitis B diagnoses in young people, who have benefited from the introduction of universal vaccination of infants in 2000 and adolescent catch up programs introduced in 1998. Vaccination coverage at 24 months of age reached 95% in 2015, achieving the national strategy target for hepatitis B childhood immunisation.

Note to editors: [The Kirby Institute’s Hepatitis B and C in Australia Annual Surveillance Report Supplement 2016](#) was released today at the [10th Australasian Viral Hepatitis 2016 Conference](#) alongside *Annual Report of Trends in Behaviour Supplement 2016 on viral hepatitis* by UNSW’s [Centre for Social Research in Health](#).

The Kirby Institute’s *2016 Annual Surveillance Report of HIV, viral hepatitis and sexually transmissible infections in Australia* and the *2016 Aboriginal Surveillance Report of HIV, viral hepatitis, STIs* will be released on Monday 14 November at the Australasian HIV & AIDS Conference in Adelaide.

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