Editor’s Letter: A Simple Test to Save Your Life

September 30, 2011 By Tim Horn

Has your doctor checked you for a “silent killer”—a disease that rarely causes symptoms and yet claims the lives of thousands of Americans a year? If you’re thinking diabetes, heart disease, breast cancer or prostate cancer, chances are good you’re getting all the necessary poking and prodding from your health care provider. But what about a virus that is silently causing potentially fatal liver disease in one of every 33 baby boomers and one in seven African Americans? Been tested for that? Probably not.

The virus in question is hepatitis C, an infection that most Americans don’t know about and most health care providers don’t understand. This helps explain why an astonishing 75 percent of those living with hepatitis C do not know they’re infected with the virus.

Where we are: Roughly 1 percent of U.S. residents—up to 3.9 million people; nearly four times the number of people living with HIV—are believed to be chronic carriers of the hepatitis C virus (HCV). Though only a percentage of them will develop liver failure or liver cancer in their lifetimes, hep C remains a leading cause of liver transplants in the United States and is currently killing 12,000 Americans a year.

Where we’re headed

During the next 10 to 20 years, the number of people with advanced liver disease is expected to quadruple, and the death rate will likely triple. What’s more, total medical costs for people living with hepatitis C could more than double over the next two decades, from $30 billion to $80 billion per year. And with so many baby boomers unaware that they have hep C, they’ll be carrying the possibility of high-cost treatment into their Medicare years.

The coming explosion in hepatitis C–related liver disease and death isn’t a result of an increase in new cases. In fact, the number of new infections has sharply decreased during the past two decades. What will cause the explosion is that thousands of people living with the virus—probably unaware they even have it—will soon start showing signs of an infection that the slowly attacks the liver, over the course of 20 to 30 years, without obvious symptoms of illness.

More than two thirds of people living with hepatitis were born between 1946 and 1965 and were likely infected in the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s. Transmission requires nothing more than a tattoo or a blood transfusion or a fleeting experiment with an injected (and possibly snorted) recreational

drug, to name a few risk factors. And while the hazy, carefree days of yesteryear are a distant memory to many baby boomers, a sleeping giant of a disease is set to awaken.

But it's not all gloom and doom. In fact, it's quite the contrary. Hepatitis C can be cured, though treatment is best started before serious liver scarring develops. Two new drugs, designed specifically to attack the hepatitis C virus, were approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in May. When they're taken in combination with two older medications, even people with the hardest-to-treat form of the virus stand a 70 percent chance of clearing hep C after a year of treatment.

The future looks even brighter. At least four dozen virus-attacking and immune system–boosting drugs are being developed for people living with hepatitis C. Not only could new combinations of these drugs push cure rates near the 100 percent range, but they might also do away with the need for older drugs, which sometimes come with significant side effects.

All of this is to say that one simple concept can help prevent liver failure, liver cancer and death in tens of thousands of people who have hepatitis C and don't know it: awareness. Learn the basics of hepatitis C and how it is transmitted. Know that curative treatment is available. And above all, get tested for the hepatitis C virus.

To borrow a familiar clarion call that continues to motivate communities of people living with HIV/AIDS: "Silence = Death." Hepmag.com is pleased to bring you the facts about hepatitis C—information about the infection and its risk factors, the simplicity of testing, and the availability of lifesaving treatment. We hope to remove both silence and death from the equation. In their place, we offer awareness, to provide a lifeline for the thousands of people living with hepatitis C—especially those who don't yet know it.

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