Can $15 Million Eradicate Hepatitis C in Appalachia?

The University of Kentucky has received a multimillion grant from the federal government to do just that.

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Last week, the University of Kentucky was awarded a $15 million grant from the federal government and $50 million in donated treatments to help eradicate hepatitis C virus (HCV) in its home county via a new initiative, Kentucky.com reports.

Aimed at helping rid Perry County of the liver virus, the Kentucky Viral Hepatitis Treatment Project, as the initiative is to be known, will take a “harm reduction first” approach and will include more support for local needle exchange programs and increased funding to improve access to medication-assisted therapy for opioid users. Thanks to the grant, the intiative will also offer case management services, including help with housing or unemployment for those who need it.

Meanwhile, Eastern Kentucky, where the university is located, continues to fight one of the nation’s fiercest battles against opioid addiction and injection drug use. The initiative’s lead researcher, Jennifer Havens of the University of Kentucky Center on Drug and Alcohol Research, has long warned about the potential for HIV and hepatitis C outbreaks in the region as a result of an increase in substance abuse across Appalachia.

Havens says the hope is to build a model for rural hepatitis C treatment that can be used nationwide. Gilead Sciences’ donation of 900 doses of next-generation hepatitis C medications, which cure most people of the virus after 12 weeks of treatment, will help achieve that goal.

Moving forward, the initiative will be funded directly by the National Cancer Institute and the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

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