Cherokee Nation Is First U.S. Community to Seek Complete Elimination of Hepatitis C

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The Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma has become the first community in the United States to set a goal to completely eliminate hepatitis C virus (HCV) from its population, PBS reports. If successful, U.S. health authorities believe the tribe's ambitious program could become a national model for eliminating hep C in the future.

HCV rates are nearly five times higher among Native Americans than the national average. Native Americans are also twice as likely to die from the liver disease than other Americans, a problem perpetuated by higher rates of injection drug use, alcohol use and lack of access to health care in the community.

That's why in 2012 Cherokee officials began working with the University of Oklahoma, the Oklahoma State Department of Health and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to design a targeted hep C elimination program for their community. The initiative, which launched in late 2015, is now taking one of the country's most aggressive approaches to ending the epidemic, with plans to eliminate the virus in the Cherokee population as soon as possible, rather than staging treatment for the sickest people or those found to be most at-risk for the virus.

Over the next few years, the Cherokee hep C elimination program hopes to evaluate the need for and visibility of opioid substitution clinics, significantly increase HCV testing, increase access to HCV treatment and disseminate public awareness campaigns and training programs for healthcare providers in the tribal community to help treat the disease.

Another way the Cherokee plan differs from the national plan to eliminate hep C is that it aims to screen everyone between ages 20 and 69, regardless of a person's so-called risk factors, such as a history of injection drug use or generational distinctions that call out baby boomers (people born between 1945 and 1965) as priority testing groups.

Pharmaceutical companies are also offering substantial discounts for hep C treatment for use in the Cherokee program. Gilead Sciences recently donated $1.5 million to the University of Oklahoma for its part in the elimination initiative.

So far, the Cherokee health system has treated almost 300 people living with hep C. According to a recent program evaluation, 96 percent of those treated under the program are now HCV-free.

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