Cherokee Nation Has Hep C Elimination in its Sights

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Two years after receiving special support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Gilead Sciences, the Cherokee Nation American Indian population is on its way toward total hepatitis C virus (HCV) elimination, according to a recent update from the tribe at last week's World Indigenous People's Conference on Viral Hepatitis.

According to the report, nearly half of the Cherokee population has been tested for hepatitis C over the last two years, and approximately one quarter of those diagnosed with the liver virus have been cured thus far. The tribe's ambitious HCV elimination program began in August 2015, following a major pledge of support from the CDC and an additional $1.5 million donation from Gilead for testing kits and research.

Currently, the elimination program offers hepatitis screenings to all citizens ages 20 to 69, rather than focusing on specific at-risk populations. To identify as many people as possible, the initiative—in partnership with the Indian Health Service—also offers HCV screenings at dental and emergency care clinics and to children of mothers who do not know their HCV status at the time of childbirth.

Since the program started, infectious disease experts at the Cherokee Nation say about 46,000 people have been tested, 1,076 of whom tested positive for HCV antibodies and 760 of whom were confirmed to have chronic hepatitis C. Of those, 605 have begun treatment and 155 are waiting to be tested or to begin treatment. In addition, 400 people have completed treatment and are officially cured.

Moving forward, the tribe aims to continue raising hepatitis C awareness among its members and will be applying for further agency grant funding to help train community health workers to test people who do not visit local doctors or dentists. There are more than 350,000 Cherokee Nation tribal citizens worldwide, with approximately 130,000 located in northeastern Oklahoma, where testing efforts are being focused.

The report also notes that under a treaty right with the United States government, Cherokee Nation citizens are guaranteed access to medical care, which makes this population easier to track and screen than others in the United States. Advocates say the tribe's strategy could one day be used as a model for universal health care and HCV elimination across the country.

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