Eliminate Hepatitis C by 2030? Health Experts Say Not So Fast

The World Health Organization's goal to end the epidemic will be "narrowly missed," says a new study.

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In 2016, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced an ambitious plan to end the global hepatitis C virus (HCV) epidemic by 2030. Four years later, a new research paper by health experts in the United Kingdom asserts that goal is likely to be "narrowly missed." The good news is it may be achievable by 2032 with the implementation of new tools and interventions to tackle the epidemic, Healio reports.

WHO's stated goal—to prevent 15.1 million new HCV infections and 1.5 million hepatitis C–related deaths worldwide—was part of the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development goals.

To determine whether that goal is still possible, researchers at Imperial College London created a mathematical model to project the future course of the global HCV epidemic, calibrating it to 190 countries. The study considered account demographics, the number of people who inject drugs in those countries, current coverage of hepatitis C treatment and prevention programs, HCV prevalence and data on attributable hepatitis C–related mortality.

They found that by 2030, if interventions are scaled up such that HCV transmission in non-injection drug users is reduced by 80 percent and harm reduction coverage is increased by 40 percent, 14.1 million new infections could be avoided—just 1 million short of WHO's original goal. Adding direct-acting antivirals to the mix could prevent 640,00 deaths. The researchers also found that following through with comprehensive prevention, screening and treatment interventions could avert 1.5 million deaths related to cirrhosis and liver cancer—meeting that 2030 goal but just barely missing total mortality reduction benchmarks by 4 percent.

But health experts are still optimistic about the results. "The concept of eliminating hepatitis is gaining traction with the adoption of the WHO strategy, mention of 'combating hepatitis' in the Sustainable Development Goals, and expansion of hepatitis services in some countries. Thus, it is encouraging that the analysis by Heffernan and colleges shows that this concept is achievable," said Stefan Wiktor, MD, MPH, acting professor of global health in the University of Washington School of Medicine and Public Health in Seattle who wrote an editorial to accompany the study.

Study authors also estimated that implementing this strategy will not be cheap—and could cost as much as $11.9 billion between 2016 and 2021 alone.

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