Ending the U.S. Epidemics of Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C Is Now Feasible

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Eliminating hepatitis B virus (HBV) and hepatitis C virus (HCV) as public health problems is now a feasible goal in the United States, according to a recent report from The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine. However, experts believe doing so will require far more time, resources and hard work, Medscape reports.

The analysis, titled "Eliminating the Public Health Problem of Hepatitis B and C in the United States: Phase One Report" sets out to determine how HBV vaccines and new HCV treatments could help stem the tide of the epidemics. The study, sponsored by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), also aimed to identify the barriers to that lofty public health goal.

One of the biggest barriers mentioned in the report was the high price of hep C treatments. HCV cures cost as much as $94,500 per person for a standard course of treatment, which many insurers in this country have been reluctant to cover.

Researchers also pointed to issues with hep B and hep C surveillance. According to the analysis, there are still very few places nationwide equipped or adequately funded to detect asymptomatic cases of liver disease, let alone track and treat them. Viral hepatitis testing and vaccination programs among immigrant populations from places like Asia and Africa in this country have also been "inadequate" so far, according to researchers. What's more, access to quality health care is not always guaranteed for people with viral liver disease. According to the report, stigma surrounding both HBV and HCV also remains a substantial barrier to testing and care in this country.

While the paper brings up some interesting questions about the state of viral hepatitis in this country, researchers stressed that the report does not discuss eradicating hep B and C from the United States completely, but rather, making its status as a public health problem disappear. Phase Two of the National Academies report, which is currently underway, will look into potential solutions to overcome these barriers.

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