Advocates Adapt Global HIV Strategy for Cheaper HCV Drugs

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A new report by the Global Health Justice Partnership (GHJP), the Treatment Action Group (TAG) and the Initiative for Medicines, Access and Knowledge argues for a global strategy to fight the hepatitis C virus (HCV) that is similar to the HIV/AIDS fight, according to a press release from Yale Law School, which co-hosts GHJP with Yale School of Public Health.

The 51-page report, titled "Ending an Epidemic: Overcoming Barriers to an HCV-Free Future," warns that global efforts to end the hep C epidemic will not work unless millions of people in low- and middle-income countries are given affordable access to new, highly effective antiviral drugs.

The advocacy groups are pushing for a global strategy similar to ones previously used for improving access to HIV/AIDS treatments. They plan to get cheaper, generic versions of HCV drugs onto international markets by pressuring manufacturers like Gilead Sciences to allow other companies to make them.

Gilead's hep C drug Sovaldi (sofosbuvir) costs $1,000 a pill or $84,000 for a full course of treatment in the United States. Although Gilead has given out substantial discounts and generic licenses to several low-income nations since releasing Sovaldi in December 2013, the company has not yet been willing to give up control of the hep C market in other countries, including India, where discounted drugs still cost as much as 20 percent of the average annual income.

The report also details several other barriers to hep C treatment, including the high cost of providing specialty HCV care along with the new drugs, as well as the need to improve outreach to key populations at a high risk of infection, such as injection drug users.

"Just like with HIV/AIDS, we're going to need international donors to step up like they did with the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, to make HCV treatment a reality for millions around the world," Karyn Kaplan, the director of international hepatitis and HIV policy and advocacy for TAG, said in the press release.

Hep C affects 185 million people worldwide, which is five times as many people who are living with HIV.

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