Why Is It So Hard to Track and Treat Young People With Hep C

Doctors are finding ways to diagnose and treat this difficult-to-reach demographic.

December 7, 2018 By Casey Halter

As access to hepatitis C virus (HCV) treatment expands across the country, young people are still getting left out when it comes to diagnosis and care, and doctors are trying to figure out how to do better at combating the crisis, MDMag reports.

According to a recent study presented at IDWeek earlier this fall, from a pool of nearly 269,000 teenage and young-adult patients across 19 states, just 2.5 percent were tested for hepatitis C. Among those with a history of drug use, just 8.9 percent were tested. Among those officially diagnosed with an opioid-use disorder, 35 percent were tested—despite the fact that Americans who use opioids are nearly nine times more likely to have hepatitis C than the general population.

What's more, an additional study on hepatitis C prevalence in young drug users ages 22 to 30 published this year found that even when diagnosed, these patients face a number of barriers in accessing treatment, including minimum liver damage requirements before medication is given in some states and the stigma drug users face from health care providers who write them off as "junkies."

So how can medical providers better target young people? Right now, a lot of experts are looking at a blueprint designed by Australia, which says the country could eliminate hepatitis C in the next 10 to 15 years.

They plan to do so by implementing a universal hepatitis C screening policy—regardless of age to help track down hard-to-reach cases and reduce stigma surrounding the disease. Expanding access to new direct-acting antivirals with a fixed payment method that would ensure all Medicaid and uninsured patients have access to care when diagnosed would also significantly help.

To learn more about hepatitis C and young people, click here.

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