Finding Undiagnosed Hepatitis C in U.S. Emergency Rooms

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Urban emergency rooms in the United States tend to see high rates of undiagnosed hepatitis C virus (HCV), according to new findings published in the Annals of Emergency Medicine. As a result, experts argue that safety-net providers could be an important part of stemming the spread of HCV, UPI reports.

Today, hep C affects an estimated 3 million people in the United States. Public health officials posit that up to three-quarters of people living with the liver disease are unaware of their status, which is why health departments across the country are looking for new ways to find HCV-positive people and connect them to care.

Hospital ERs could be the perfect place to look. For the study, researchers in California analyzed patient data on 26,639 adults who were admitted to the emergency room at Highland Hospital in Oakland over a six-month period.

Of those people, doctors selected 2,581 to get tested for hep C, either because they were baby boomers (folks born between 1945 and 1965) or had reported ever injecting drugs—two of the highest-risk groups for HCV in the United States.

In that testing group, researchers found 10.3 percent of patients tested positive for hep C, 70 percent of which were determined to have developed a chronic HCV infection. In line with national estimates, researchers said just 24 percent of those HCV-positive patients were aware they had the virus before they got tested at the hospital.

“We have a better than even chance of reaching many of the 3 million people who are infected, since they tend to be heavy emergency department users already,” said Douglas White, MD, a researcher and ER physician at Highland. “It gives us a chance to connect these people to ongoing care at HCV clinics or elsewhere in the health care system.”

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