Advancing Awareness and Action Against Hepatitis C Among African Americans

March 25, 2015 By Ron Valdiserri

A recent forum convened by HHS focused on strengthening the response to hepatitis C in African American communities, gathering representatives of more than three dozen organizations from across the nation to discuss ideas, opportunities, and strategies to address this significant health disparity.

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection disproportionately affects African Americans, with some estimates indicating that African Americans have rates of chronic HCV approximately double that of whites. Additionally, HCV is a major cause of liver cancer and African Americans have the highest mortality rates from liver and bile duct cancer. (Read more about HCV and African Americans.)

Given these stark disparities, African Americans are among the populations prioritized by the Action Plan for the Prevention, Care and Treatment of Viral Hepatitis (Action Plan), which outlines steps to educate communities about the benefits of viral hepatitis prevention, care, and treatment as well as actions to enhance healthcare provider knowledge about populations most disproportionately impacted. The Action Plan is a national plan that requires the participation and engagement of many partners in order to achieve its goals, especially those related to addressing health disparities like improving outcomes for African Americans living with hepatitis C.

The HHS Office of HIV/AIDS and Infectious Disease Policy and the HHS Office of Minority Health organized the two-day Forum on Hepatitis C in African American Communities with input from other partners. Participants included leaders from national and community-based organizations representing healthcare providers, the faith community, the business community, and health advocates, as well as representatives from state and local health departments, Black sororities and fraternities, and federal partners in the Action Plan including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the HHS Office on Women's Health, the Department of Veterans Affairs., and others. (View the list of participants)

Held earlier this month, the forum began with presentations on hepatitis C in the African American community by Dr. John Ward, Director of CDC's Division of Viral Hepatitis, as well as presentations about advances in HCV screening, care and treatment, and the Action Plan. These presentations provided all participants with a common foundation of knowledge that informed the participant-driven dialogues that followed about how to best empower providers and communities to address hepatitis C.

Some of the ideas and strategies generated by the participants included:

- When educating African American communities about hepatitis C
- Lead with personal stories to capture attention before offering expert opinion
- Focus on that fact that with the availability of a cure, this is a “winnable battle”
- Leverage the power of social media
- Highlight that the Affordable Care Act provides opportunities for HCV prevention, diagnosis and treatment
- Build strength in numbers by spreading awareness throughout networks and engaging in partnerships, foster development or expansion of information pipelines through coalitions, webinars, and sharing resources among interested organizations
- Highlight successful community-based efforts to diagnose and treat hepatitis C
- Invest in systems and processes that promote routine HCV testing and quality care

At the conclusion of the forum, participants indicated they or their organizations would undertake a range of activities in the coming weeks and months to educate their colleagues, networks, and communities, including:

- Disseminating emails/letters to their constituents describing the forum and educating them about HCV among African Americans;
- Evaluating existing strategies and programming to include hepatitis C;
- Planning hepatitis C training/education sessions for healthcare providers;
- Developing strategies to increase hepatitis C awareness and/or testing specifically among African American “Baby Boomers,” given the high prevalence of infection among that age cohort;
- Ensuring that community education events include information about HCV and sponsoring hepatitis C screening community events;
- Adding hepatitis C information, resources, and/or widgets, buttons, or badges to organizational

web pages, including links to CDC’s online viral hepatitis risk assessment tool;

- Joining the online conversation about hepatitis C by beginning to follow viral hepatitis-related social media accounts (#ViralHepAction, #HepC) and sharing blog posts about HCV and the Action Plan;
- Planning to make use of materials from CDC’s Know More Hepatitis campaign in various activities;
- Joining in the observance of Hepatitis Awareness Month in May and/or Hepatitis Testing Day on May 19; and
- Considering implementation of a community-wide HCV test and cure program.

Each of these activities complements the steps detailed in the Action Plan and will make important contributions to growing efforts to improve HCV testing, care, and treatment among African Americans. We are grateful to these leaders for their thoughtful contributions to the dialogue begun during the forum and we look forward to continuing to collaborate with them over the coming months and years to create additional opportunities to address hepatitis C among African Americans.

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