Inmates Sue Minnesota for Alleged Denial of Hepatitis C Drugs

May 29, 2015

Two inmates are suing the Minnesota Department of Corrections to gain access to hepatitis C virus (HCV) treatment, which they claim has been denied to them because of its high cost, the Minnesota Star Tribune reports.

The lawsuit, which was filed in federal court by the International Humanitarian Law Institute, is seeking class-action status. The case ramps up the national debate on how U.S. prison systems are struggling to afford to treat inmates with the newest hep C cures, which can cost around $90,000 per patient for a standard course.

The inmates claim that they have been refused access to the drugs “in deliberate indifference to their serious medical needs” while incarcerated in the state’s system. The Minnesota corrections department denied the claim, saying, “It is not true that offenders do not have access to the new medications.”

Many commercial health insurers across the United States are controlling their HCV costs by limiting access to new drugs to patients with advanced liver disease. However, even with similar restrictive policies in place, a recent study from Rhode Island shows that most U.S. prison budgets would likely be overwhelmed by the cost of treating their sickest inmates.

Advocates claim that at least 1,350 Minnesota inmates have or will test positive for HCV. Prisoners in the United States are at a far greater risk for hep C than the general population, with national statistics estimating that as much as 12 to 35 percent of inmates have the virus.

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