New Hepatitis B Awareness Campaign Targets the Bronx's West African Community

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Montefiore Health System in the Bronx recently launched a new hepatitis B virus (HBV) awareness campaign seeking to engage the New York City borough's thriving West African community in awareness, prevention and treatment of the liver virus, Modern Healthcare reports.

The Montefiore Starfish Program, as the campaign is called, was launched by hepatologist Samuel Sigal, MD, who joined the hospital network in 2015 and said he was "overwhelmed" by the number of hep B patients he was seeing who were recent immigrants from West Africa. City data show there are about 120,000 West African residents currently living in the Bronx and that an estimated 10 to 15 percent of the population may be living with the blood-borne virus.

Starfish aims to inform the community about the health risks of hep B, which can be passed via childbirth, sex and injection drug use, and is known to cause cirrhosis, which can lead to liver cancer if left untreated. The program also aims to promote screening and treatment for people who are already infected and vaccinations for newborns and others who are HBV-free.

The campaign's name comes from one of Sigal's favorite West African parables, told to him by a former patient. In the story, a passerby encounters a young man collecting beached starfish and tossing them back into the sea. He asks the young man how he hopes to make a difference when there are so many starfish, to which he answers, "It makes a difference for this one."

As the program expands, Montefiore hopes to offer free hepatitis B screenings for every West African person living in the Bronx and to offer all those who test positive a referral for evaluation and treatment. The program is funded in part by New York City's larger Viral Hepatitis Initiative, which helps pay for peer navigators at health systems to help improve health outcomes in their communities. The hep B program will be supported through at least the end of fiscal year 2018.

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