Advocates Criticize Plans to Restrict N.Y. Hepatitis C Drugs

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The National AIDS Treatment Advocacy Project (NATAP) and others have sent a letter to Governor Andrew Cuomo (D–N.Y.) and Howard A. Zucker, MD, of the New York State Department of Health, urging them to reconsider plans to restrict access to new hepatitis C virus (HCV) treatments, according to a NATAP press release.

The letter comes in response to a September 18 legislative meeting in which state officials recommended the state Medicaid board include several restrictions on access to Sovaldi (sofosbuvir) from Gilead Sciences. The new HCV treatment boasts 95 percent cure rates with far fewer side effects or complications than previous treatments.

Only patients with advanced liver damage—either stage F3, pre-cirrhosis, or stage F4, cirrhosis—would qualify for Sovaldi under the proposed plan. The recommendations would require HIV coinfected patients to have undetectable HIV viral loads. Also under consideration is limiting access by current or former drug and alcohol abusers.

Advocates argue that the proposed criteria are dangerous because hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC, a.k.a. liver cancer) can start developing as early as stage F2. They also note that people with HIV are at an increased risk for hep C complications and that limiting access by injection drug users could hurt HCV prevention efforts.

ACT UP New York, Health GAP (Global Access Project), Treatment Action Group, VOCAL New York and Harlem United also signed the letter. The groups urge legislators to ditch the restrictions and instead support a comprehensive plan to treat and end New York's hep C epidemic, similar to what's been done with HIV/AIDS.

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