Oregon Expands Access to Treatment Amid Highest Hep C Mortality Rate in the U.S.

Oregon has held on to restrictive Medicaid requirements, despite expert recommendations not to.

May 25, 2018 By Casey Halter

Oregon is the latest state in the country to expand state-funded access to hepatitis C virus (HCV) treatment amid growing pressure from advocates, health care providers and community responders involved in fighting the epidemic. The state currently has the highest hepatitis C mortality rate in the country and has faced a 20 percent rise in new HCV infections from 2015 to 2016, PBS NewsHour reports in interviews conducted by its special correspondent Cat Wise, who discussed the topic with various individuals, including people with hep C and health officials.

An estimated 100,000 Oregonians have been infected with the virus and more than 500 die from HCV-related complications every year. The virus has historically been hard to treat, but new medications promise up to 95 percent cure rates for patients who adhere to a standard 12-week course of treatment.

The only problem is, state Medicaid programs have been reluctant to pay for the medications, which, when they first appeared on the market cost up to $84,000 per patient to treat, depending on the regimen. Oregon is far from the only state to have restrictive Medicaid requirements regarding HCV treatment access to only the sickest patients, but some of those restrictions are being lifted.

However, this month, the chief medical officer of the Oregon Health Authority (which oversees the state's Medicaid program), Dana Hargunani, MD, said the agency is starting to expand access. Since 2014, Oregon has spent more than $94 million on hepatitis C drugs, covering about 1,500 people. That number is likely to rise as more people access treatment.

Hepatitis C advocates are working with the state and private insurers to broaden access to the drugs. Until then, many people remain waiting for a lifesaving cure.

To read the full interview series, click here.

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