Experts Urge More Medicaid Access to Hepatitis C Treatment

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U.S. experts from the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (PACHA) and the Public Health Service are urging federal and state Medicaid programs to significantly widen access for new hepatitis C virus (HCV) treatments, The New York Times reports.

In the United States, hep C kills more people than AIDS, causing nearly 20,000 deaths every year. About one-fourth of people living with HIV nationwide also have hep C.

In a letter, the experts claim that many state Medicaid programs have put cost-saving restrictions on new HCV treatments that are “unreasonable and discriminatory” and are “not supported by medical evidence” or treatment recommendations backed by groups like the Infectious Diseases Society of America and the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases.

Specifically, the experts criticized three types of restrictions: first, that some states only cover new treatments for people who already have advanced liver disease. Second, that many states require people to abstain from alcohol and illicit drugs for up to a year before starting treatment. And third, that some states won’t cover new HCV drugs unless they were prescribed by medical specialists.

The experts also claim that new HCV treatments—which, on the low end, can cost up to $1,000 per pill or $84,000 for a 12-week course—will end up saving the country money over time. Cost of care estimates show that it’s cheaper to treat hep C before complications develop like cirrhosis, liver cancer or the need for a liver transplant.

Activists have been urging the Obama administration to issue direct guidelines regarding state Medicaid allowances for hep C treatment, but federal officials have not yet taken any direct action.

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