Hepatitis C Treatment Costs Threaten to Cripple Prison Budgets

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Treating hepatitis C virus (HCV) among the long-term HCV-positive prison population in Rhode Island would cost nearly twice the entire annual health care budget of the state's correctional system. Publishing their findings in the Journal of Urban Health, researchers reviewed medical records to estimate the number of Rhode Island Department of Correction prisoners with HCV, dividing them by the presence of fibrosis or advanced fibrosis, as well as by the remaining amount of time on their sentences.

The researchers estimated that 17 percent of the prisoners have hep C.

The total 2014 state correctional system health care budget is $19.9 million and its pharmacy budget is $2.7 million. Treating all of those HCV-positive prisoners with at least six months left on their sentences would cost an estimated $34 million. Treating just those with advanced fibrosis would cost around $15 million. Providing hep C drugs only for those with advanced fibrosis who have at least a year left on their sentences would cost about $12 million.

"The rising cost of therapy goes beyond merely a 'sticker shock' phenomenon and needs to be seriously reevaluated," the study authors state. "Corrections have inherited an important public health opportunity to address the HCV epidemic. It is unrealistic, however, to expect correctional facilities to attempt widespread HCV treatment with the currently available budgets."

In addition to pushing for lowered treatment costs, the authors suggest that outside funding sources may be needed to help pay to treat inmates.

To read the Pharmacy Times story, click here.

To read the press release, click here.

To read the study abstract, click here.

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