Texas Is Still Denying Patients Access to Hepatitis C Treatment

It is one of 12 states that still limits medications to only the sickest patients.

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As state Medicaid programs across the country continue to expand access to hepatitis C virus (HCV) treatment, Texas remains one of the strictest places in the United States to get it. But advocates are fighting back, and now the Texas Health and Human Services Commission says it is reconsidering the matter, the Houston Chronicle reports.

Currently, Texas denies hepatitis C treatment to all but the sickest patients and those who can show they have been sober for at least three months. It is one of roughly a dozen states that require Medicaid patients to have serious liver damage before qualifying for the drugs, and the majority of Texas patients are being denied unless they have cancer or have already had a liver transplant, say local physicians.

Doctors argue that delaying treatment is unfair to patients and perpetuates the spread of hepatitis C. Texas estimates that more than 580,000 people may be living with the virus throughout the state and has so far spent nearly $155 million on hepatitis C treatment. However, it is unclear how many people the state has treated or denied.

Elsewhere across the country, lawsuits and advocacy have gotten 17 states—including New York and Florida—to impose no restrictions regarding liver damage before a patient can receive HCV treatment. That's why three dozen medical professionals are currently lobbying the state to loosen its criteria for Medicaid patients. The Texas Health and Human Services Commission told reporters that it is reconsidering the matter but did not provide further details.

In the meantime, uninsured Texans can apply for free hepatitis C medications through Gilead Sciences' and AbbVie's patient assistance programs, no matter how sick they are. But Medicaid patients will likely have to wait until either they become sick enough or the state catches up with current HCV treatment recommendations.

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