Two Reasons Hepatitis C Deaths in Oklahoma Will Likely Decline

Oklahoma ranks third in the nation for hepatitis C deaths, and the virus is mostly transmitted through injection drug use.

June 24, 2021 By Trent Straube

The hepatitis C situation in Oklahoma is rather dire: The state ranks third in the nation when it comes to deaths caused by hepatitis C, and transmissions are increasingly related to the opioid epidemic and young people who inject drugs who often don't have health insurance.

So why are health officials in the state suddenly optimistic about improving these numbers? As KGOU reports in a series of articles, two changes in Oklahoma have the potential to radically improve the hep C outlook.

But first, hepatitis simply means inflammation of the liver, an organ that acts as the body's filter. Hepatitis has many causes, including viruses—such as hepatitis A, B and C viruses—as well as toxins and chemicals from excessive alcohol and fat. When the inflammation becomes severe, it can result in the hardening and scarring of liver tissues—which can impede the liver's ability to function—a condition called cirrhosis. Over time, this can lead to liver cancer, liver failure and death. (For more information, check out Hep's Introduction to Hepatitis.)

The good news for people with hepatitis C is that in most cases the disease is curable. What's more, hep C treatment is easier than ever, usually consisting of daily tablets for a number of weeks.

However, in order to be treated, people with hepatitis C must know their status and have access to health care. Luckily, as of this month, many previously uninsured Oklahomans can obtain health insurance and Medicaid.

In an election last summer, Oklahomans narrowly voted to approve Medicaid expansion and provisions of the Affordable Care Act, making it the 37th state to do so. Known as State Question 802 on the ballot, the measure added Medicaid expansion to the state's constitution, which means that lawmakers in the heavily Republican state can't do much to fight it.

Since enrollment in expanded Medicaid opened on June 1, KGOU reports in a separate article, nearly 100,000 Oklahomans have signed up—half the number of people expected to be eligible.

Another change in the state is on the horizon and will surely help lower hepatitis C rates: Lawmakers this year approved a legal pathway for harm reduction services, including syringe exchanges. The state's health department will work with community groups, according to KGOU, not only to provide clean needles but to offer testing and treatment.

To learn more about the importance of harm reduction, see "Syringe Services Are Vital to Ending the Hepatitis C Epidemic" and "Here's What the Future of Harm Reduction Looks Like."

Hep's Basics on Hepatitis C Prevention spells out steps individuals can take to reduce their risk of transmission:

- Not injecting or stopping injection drug use would eliminate the chief route of hepatitis C transmission. If you continue injecting drugs, use new, sterile syringes and needles every time you inject. Everything that is associated with drug use is a potential source of hep C, including the syringes, needles, water, the drug, the drug preparation equipment and the surface on which the drug is prepared. You can reduce your chances of acquiring or transmitting HCV by not sharing anything associated with drug use.

- Do not share any non-injection drug equipment, such as straws or pipes.

- Do not share toothbrushes or razors or any personal care items that might have come in contact with someone living with hep C.

- If you are considering a tattoo or body piercing, be sure it is done by a reputable, licensed expert who follows strict hygiene procedures and uses sterile equipment.

- While hepatitis C transmission through sexual activity is rare, practicing safer sex using a protective barrier (e.g., condoms) can reduce the risk of transmitting HCV, along with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

- If you have hepatitis C, be sure to cover any cuts or wounds. If you get blood on a surface, a solution of one part bleach to 10 parts water is an effective disinfectant.

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