8 February 2016: Out with the old, in with the new

The availability of effective hep C treatment has a positive impact on transplant waiting lists.

February 5, 2016 By David Pieper

Left unchecked, hep C can lead to cirrhosis so severe that a transplant is the only option. For my mate Jeff (not his real name) the last couple of years have seen his health rapidly decline, and just last week he had a liver transplant. He had been waiting for over a year for a liver to become available and has twice been rushed to hospital, only to find the liver was unsuitable. He was one of 176 Australians currently on the waiting list for a liver transplant.

With the listing of breakthrough hepatitis C medications on the Pharmaceutical Benefit Scheme, all 230,000 Australians with hepatitis C will soon be able to access the cure. This decision will profoundly reduce the long-term health costs associated with this debilitating disease. Hopefully it will also reduce pressure on transplant waiting lists.

Jeff was lucky enough to have treatment to cure his hep C before the transplant. But for many the newly transplanted liver is infected with hep C the minute it comes into contact with their blood. Jeff will be on anti-rejection medication for the rest of his life and will probably develop insulin dependent diabetes, but he now has the chance to share a few more years with his wife. For others still waiting for a transplant, a course of these new drugs will eliminate hepatitis C and give them a greater chance of keeping their transplant longer.

As our population ages, more and more people will require a transplant. The pressure on transplant programs is immense with the total burden of diseases of the hearts, lungs, liver and kidney rising steadily. The availability of effective hep C treatment has a positive impact on transplant waiting lists. Reducing the incidence of hepatitis C in the community will have a profound effect on people living with the disease and it will also reduce the flow-on impact on transplantation.

Hopefully the availability of effective, tolerable hep C treatment means that liver transplantation will become a rare thing in the future.

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