Eliminating Hepatitis C in the United States (and the World)

January 25, 2016 By Lucinda K. Porter RN

In March, Australia will begin offering hepatitis C treatment to everyone, including those who are incarcerated or engaging in high risk behaviors (or “behaviours” for our Australian readers). Access is granted regardless of level of liver damage and substance use. It will cost up to $37.70 per person.

Australia wants to eradicate hep C in one generation. We can do this in the United States, and by extension, globally. It all begins with screening.

Last week, I wrote about the low rates of hepatitis C testing among baby boomers, particularly for women. One of the reasons that some clinicians use for not screening people at risk for hepatitis C is the cost of treatment is so high. High costs translates to limited access to treatment, so why test for hepatitis C if they can’t be treated.

This is a ridiculous argument for the following reasons:

1. Even if treatment is denied to a person with hep C, awareness of the disease provides opportunities to safeguard their health, For instance, they can stop or reduce alcohol use, learn how to take Tylenol (acetaminophen) safely, steer clear of raw shellfish, and be immunized against hep A and B.
2. Screening may reduce further hepatitis C transmission. For instance, the data suggest that hep C-positive people who use injection drugs (PWIDs) may seek partners who are also hep C-positive, a practice known as serosorting.

In short, knowledge is power. However, in this case, knowledge is the beginning of power, because ultimately, if we are going to eradicate hepatitis C, we need universal access to treatment. If we don’t intervene soon, we may be looking at more than a quarter of a million HCV-associated deaths and half a million cases of cirrhosis by 2040.

Recent research by David Durham and colleagues (Journal of infectious Diseases) found that universal screening of PWIDs coupled with an annual treatment rate for at least 30 percent, we could begin the process of eliminating hep C by 2040.

It’s time to change the trajectory and stop hepatitis C in its tracks.

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