Hepatitis C Treatment Cost: Finding the Truth, Stating the Truth

June 27, 2016 By Lucinda K. Porter RN

Here is what I say when I want to point out the outrageous fact about Gilead's pricing for their hepatitis C medication, Sovaldi: Each pill costs $1000. Commenting on the price of Harvoni, I'd say that a 12 week-supply of pills costs $94, 500. I could say it costs close to a hundred grand. Everything in this paragraph is true.

The prices are outrageous, and by stating the cost that way, I have emphasized the egregious pricing. However, I may have unwittingly perpetuated a myth about the cost, and added fuel to the fire, making hepatitis C medications difficult to obtain because of their cost. The truth is, that the price of medications is negotiated, and Sovaldi, Harvoni, and other medications are sold for less.

I don't know how much less various payers are actually shelling out, since insurance payers aren't revealing their actual costs. Anthem said they received "substantial" discounts. One source said it may be as much as 50 percent. Another told me that 12 weeks of Harvoni was sold for an average of $60,000.

That may still sound like a large amount of money, but if you are saving nearly $35,000 per patient and you have insured 1000 hep C patients, that is a savings of 35 million dollars. That is no small change.

I think the truth about the cost is actually a range: The price of a 12 week-supply of pills is $94, 500 but the negotiated rate is less. Why does the truth matter? Because Gilead needs to be held accountable for setting the price of their hepatitis C drugs, but payers need to know the facts, and patients need hope that the price of treatment isn't out of reach for them. It's time to rewrite the headlines from, "Expensive Hepatitis C Drugs Quadrupled Prescription Spending," to "Effective Hepatitis C Drugs Cure Record Numbers,"

Soon Gilead will announce the approval of a new hepatitis C pill. When they do, I assume we will see more discussions on the price. However, after that, we need to move on to the important business of getting access to treatment for everyone and make hepatitis C a rare disease.

For an excellent webinar on hepatitis C treatment access, visit NVHR.

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