Honoring National African Immigrant and Refugee HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis Awareness (NAIRHHA) Day: The Burden of Viral Hepatitis

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National African Immigrant and Refugee HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis Awareness (NAIRHHA) Day was observed on Friday, September 9th, 2016.

The purpose of NAIRHHA Day is to bring national and local attention to the HIV and viral hepatitis needs of African immigrants living in the U.S. in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner. NAIRHHA Day also supports the eradication of other epidemics found at the intersection of viral hepatitis and HIV-related disparities among African immigrants, including tuberculosis, substance use, and mental health conditions.

This year, NAIRHHA Day will continue its focus on:

- Raising awareness about HIV/AIDS and viral hepatitis to eliminate stigma.
- Educating others about HIV and viral hepatitis prevention.
- Encouraging community screenings and linkage to care, including hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccination.
- Advocating for policies and practices that promote healthy African immigrant families, communities, and individuals.

Globally, hepatitis B (HBV) and hepatitis C (HCV) are leading causes of chronic liver disease and associated morbidity and mortality, and are largely responsible for the global increase in liver cancer. Unfortunately, hepatitis C remains endemic in many African countries, and countless African immigrant and refugee community bear the burden of these silent epidemics.

While data on the prevalence of HBV and HCV among African immigrants and refugees is sparse, studies have shown that HBV is highly prevalent (>8%) in sub-Saharan Africa. Screening performed in African immigrant populations show a very high prevalence of HBV, ranging from

10-13%.

With regard to HCV, prevalence data is sparse among US immigrants and refugees, but studies have shown very high seropositivity rates. Globally, Egypt has the highest prevalence of HCV, with some studies reporting HCV antibody positive rates of up to 15%. This high prevalence is partly due to treatment programs for with unsterilized needles, which led to high rates of transmission of HCV. As a result of this improperly sterilized medical equipment, the incidence of HCV in Egypt continues to be high.

Studies also show that awareness of HCV is low in immigrant and refugee communities. This is likely due to a combination of factors, including:

- Poor knowledge of the diseases, risk factors, and symptoms.
- Lack of access to healthcare and health information.
- Stigma associated with disease.
- Lack of symptoms from the early stages of liver disease (i.e. viral hepatitis).

Overall, NAIRHHA Day serves to bring national attention, resources, and policy change to sub-populations disproportionately affected by viral hepatitis and other diseases. We join our fellow advocates and partners in calling for a comprehensive approach to the unique social and cultural factors within the African immigrant community.

Use #AIHHchat to join the conversation and follow @NAIRHHADay on Twitter for tips and guidance as we work to raise awareness of viral hepatitis in the African immigrant and refugee communities.

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