Let’s Work Together to End Hepatitis

May 15, 2017 By NVHR

NVHR’s executive director Ryan Clary delivered the following remarks at the CDC Foundation’s “Summit for the Elimination of Hepatitis B and C as Public Health Threats in the United States” on April 27, 2017.

I want to thank National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine for developing the National Strategy for the Elimination of Hepatitis B and C. The National Viral Hepatitis Roundtable is a proud cosponsor of the report and we are looking forward to working with our partners to mount a national elimination campaign.

I will repeat what I’ve said in other venues because I think it’s worth repeating. The only way to end the grief and suffering caused by hepatitis B and C is to eliminate both diseases once and for all. We all know the grim statistics. 20,000 plus deaths per year. More deaths than all other infectious diseases combined. Number one cause of liver cancer. These are staggering statistics, but let’s remember that this about people. Let’s think about liver cancer for a minute. I’m sure many of you in the room have lost someone you love to liver cancer. I have. In fact, I was the sole caregiver for someone in his early 30’s dying of liver cancer caused by hepatitis B. Liver cancer is cruel. Liver cancer is tragic. And liver cancer caused by hepatitis doesn’t have to happen. Why would we not want to eliminate the two leading causes of liver cancer in the United States?

It’s also vital to note that eliminating hepatitis B and C will show our commitment to communities in the United States who are often poorly served and under attack in this country. I’m speaking specifically about immigrants, communities of color, people who use drugs, veterans, and people in the criminal justice system. We have an opportunity right now to show these communities that we value their lives, we value their health, and that we are approaching this movement to eliminate hepatitis not only as a broad public health campaign but as a conscious effort to help end health inequities in this country.

We are going to hear a lot over the next two days about what is in the elimination report and how we can move forward with implementation. I just want to take a minute to say what I see in the report that isn’t necessarily stated outright. I see a message to all of us in this report. I’ve spent a lot of time since the release of the strategy thinking about it. It’s a message to advocates like me, to our pharmaceutical industry partners, to medical providers, to public and private payers, to public health officials, to the government. And that simple message is – DO MORE. Work together to find common ground and advance strategies towards elimination. If you don’t like or agree with a recommendation in the strategy, come up with something else. If you find it difficult to work

together, let’s figure it out. The status quo is not working. I also think there is also a message in the strategy for patients. The message to patients is don’t settle for anything less than an all out campaign to eliminate hepatitis B and C in the United States. Demand it from all of us in this room, demand it from your elected officials, demand it from anyone who has the power to make a difference.

Finally, I wouldn’t feel right about using my time without acknowledging the current political environment that is impacting our ability to protect what we’ve gained in the fight against viral hepatitis, let alone mount an elimination campaign. As we know, the health care system and the health care safety net that is the foundation for elimination is under grave threat. We must do everything we can to protect and improve access to quality, affordable health care. Also, many communities most impacted by hepatitis B and hepatitis C have been under relentless attack in this environment. Policies and rhetoric that further racial injustice, take away immigrant rights and health care, implement discriminatory restrictions to access to hepatitis C treatment, or fail to address the opioid crisis from a human and a public health perspective: these all directly impact people with hepatitis B and C. I know we aren’t going to be able to tackle all of these issues over the next two days but I appeal to everyone to have them in your mind as we have these conversations and as we develop our strategies.

So my plea to everyone in this room and everyone watching around the country. Don’t let this Summit be another meeting where we listen to panels, take notes, go away, and never think about it again. Make a commitment to be involved in some way to move forward some or all of this strategy. Put your name on a sign-on letter. Contact your elected officials. Join a coalition or working group. Better yet – start one. Think about how we can all work together better. People living with and impacted by hepatitis B and C deserve nothing less from us. Thank you.

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