

WORLD HEPATITIS DAY AND NATIONAL AWARENESS WEEK

A MESSAGE FROM THE HON. MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND AGEING, NICOLA ROXON

- I am sorry I am unable to join you today for the launch of World Hepatitis Day and National Awareness Week.
- The Government is very concerned about the impact that viral hepatitis has on the lives of many Australians, for those who have the disease but also for their carers and families.
- One in 12 of the global population live with chronic hepatitis B or C, approximately 500 million people. At the end of 2006, an estimated 202,400 people were living with chronic hepatitis C infection and an estimated 160,000 people live with chronic Hepatitis B within Australia. This translates to approximately 1 in 55 of our population, which is thankfully, comparatively low.
- Reducing the spread of viral hepatitis is an important element of the Government's preventative health framework. The Government will continue to work in partnership with state and territory governments, non government organisations, expert clinicians and academics to ensure we have the best medical responses and social supports to stop the spread of this disease, and to provide the most appropriate up-to-date treatments.
- The current Hepatitis C Strategy 2005-2008 is being reviewed and a new strategic framework will address hepatitis more broadly including hepatitis B and the affected population groups. The Government will continue to provide free hepatitis B vaccine for babies and young people in an effort to reduce its prevalence.
- Needle and Syringe Programs are a key strategy in the prevention of hepatitis C in Australia. I have now agreed to extend the *Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Illicit Drug Diversion Initiative (IDDI) Supporting Measures relating to Needle and Syringe Programs (NSP)* to 30 June 2009. This is in recognition of the importance of ensuring that funding continues to be available for NSP's prior to the commencement of the new Australian Health Care Agreements on 1 July 2009.
- The Australian Health Ministers' Conference recently endorsed the Custodial Settings Guidelines addressing hepatitis C in prisons. They had been previously agreed to by the Corrective Services Administrators' Council and the Corrective Services Ministers' Committee. The challenge now is to implement the guidelines at State and Territory level.
- The new health care reforms should also better integrate and coordinate responses across all elements of the health sector for people affected by viral hepatitis. Promotion of healthy lifestyles and improved health outcomes are very important for those populations most at risk such as injecting drug users and Indigenous people. The setting of targets for screening and treatment is a challenge requiring a combined Commonwealth, State and Territory response to raise people's awareness and to help people complete what can be a very demanding treatment regime.
- This Government is participating and working with many stakeholders to deliver in the areas identified in the 12 Asks campaign. I encourage your participation in activities around Hepatitis Awareness Day and indeed the whole week. Congratulations to every one of you who has contributed to organising and staging this global effort to raise the profile and awareness of Viral Hepatitis.