



Media Release

Viral hepatitis: The Silent Epidemic

National Awareness Week, May 18 to May 24, 2009, World Hepatitis Day, May 19, 2009

Australian organisations are joining forces with hundreds of community groups across the world to participate in World Hepatitis Day, May 19. World Hepatitis Day encourages people to ask whether they could be one of the one in twelve people around the world living with chronic hepatitis B or C.

Globally, a staggering 570 million people are affected by viral hepatitis. In Australia, not only is hepatitis the most common notifiable health condition in the last ten years, but more than 200,000 people have chronic hepatitis C, and an estimated 160,000 Australians are living with chronic hepatitis B, yet it is still so often dealt with in silence.

“There is not enough said about it, and not enough done about it,” said Australian musician Criston Barker (ex Air Supply, Freeway and Ash), who lived with Hepatitis C and is urging people to speak out.

“People shouldn’t be afraid to discuss hepatitis. I was notified of my hepatitis C in 1990 and within eight years I required a liver transplant. Four years after that, my hep C came back with a vengeance, and I elected to undergo treatment. I have been clear for five years now and my life is fantastic,” he said.

Chronic viral hepatitis is one of the most common infectious diseases in the world and kills 1.5 million people every year – that’s 4,110 people a day.

Gastroenterologist, Nghi Phung, Westmead Hospital, Sydney, said the numbers are astounding, yet despite its prevalence, many people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds living with hepatitis B and C remain unaware not only of their hepatitis status, but of routes of transmission, common symptoms and that treatment is available. They may also be missed in the screening process said Dr Phung, as their mode of acquiring the infection is different to that of Australian born residents.

“Hepatitis B can be transmitted in a number of ways, including from mother to child, through sexual contact, through the sharing of injecting drug equipment, in health care settings, and on occasion from child to child through household and other contact.”

“Hepatitis C on the other hand, is mainly transmitted via blood to blood contact and it is not classified as a sexually transmitted infection,” she said.

The good news for Australians, said Dr Phung, is that there is a vaccine for hepatitis B, and both hepatitis B and C can be managed and treated. However, with only 2% of Australians with hepatitis C undergoing treatment, people are unnecessarily risking ongoing liver disease.

“Some people with hepatitis B or C risk ongoing liver disease, liver failure and ultimately liver transplantation if they do not undergo timely treatment. Hepatitis C is already the leading cause of liver transplants in Australia, and globally hepatitis B infection is the leading cause of liver cancer,” said Dr Phung.

Despite the alarmingly high number of Australians affected by viral hepatitis, awareness is low, and new infections continue to occur. 10,000 Australians are estimated to get hepatitis C every year, and most of these will be young people.

According to Stuart Loveday, Vice President of Hepatitis Australia, while Australia has adopted a national strategy to combat hepatitis C, our approach to hepatitis B falls far short of the mark.

“Hepatitis B is a major concern for Australia and the Asia Pacific region. Unlike for hepatitis C, Australia still lacks a national strategy to respond to the hepatitis B epidemic,” he said.

“The majority of people with chronic hepatitis B in Australia were born overseas. It is estimated that about 50% of hepatitis B cases in Australia are among people born in East and South-East Asia, and a further 20% are from other regions where hepatitis B is more prevalent, including countries in the Pacific, the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and Africa.”

“People are largely unaware that hepatitis affects the liver, how it is transmitted or what the symptoms are. We recommend people go to their doctor or contact their local hepatitis council for more information,” said Stuart Loveday.

Further information about hepatitis C can be found at www.hepatitisaustralia.com or you can call the national infoline, 1300 HEP ABC (1300 437 222).

For further information or to co-ordinate an interview please contact:

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