



Health Awareness

Hepatitis C: A Public Health Problem

(NAPSA)—A recent survey offers some insights into a public health problem that affects approximately 4 million people in the U.S.

The problem is hepatitis C, one of six identified hepatitis viruses, which may lead to inflammation and scarring that can interfere with the liver's ability to function. Since the liver plays a major role in metabolism and has other essential functions, such as inflammation can affect its ability to provide energy for the body, clean the bloodstream of toxins, aid with digestion, and help blood to clot appropriately.

People infected with the hepatitis C virus (HCV) do not necessarily feel sick from the disease and therefore do not seek medical attention. However, many carry the virus for decades after initial infection—some for the rest of their lives. As a result, many hepatitis C patients do not know they have HCV infection until years or decades after they were infected, when routine medical tests reveal serious and sometimes irreversible liver disease. Complications of liver disease may include cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer or death. From the year 2010 through 2019, models have projected \$10.7 billion in direct medical expenditures for HCV.

Hepatitis C is transmitted primarily through exposure to infected blood or blood products, mainly through needle sharing by drug users, through blood transfusions, sexual intercourse, exposure to infected blood among health care workers and exposure from mother to baby during childbirth.

Current Treatment Options

Unlike other types of hepatitis, there is no vaccine currently available to prevent HCV infec-

tion; however, many people can benefit from medical treatment. The ultimate goal of treatment is to reduce the amount of virus in the bloodstream to undetectable levels. The current standard of

There are an estimated 3-4 million cases of hepatitis C in the U.S. The findings from the "Bridging the Gaps in Understanding Hepatitis C" surveys show that there is a growing need to provide less burdensome treatments to those living with the disease.



care is a combination of medicines called pegylated interferon alpha and ribavirin. Pegylated interferon alpha is given as a subcutaneous injection every week; ribavirin is given orally twice daily as a pill. While HCV treatment can benefit some patients, the course of treatment often leaves patients feeling isolated, fatigued, or suffering from flu-like symptoms following injections.

"Bridging the Gaps in Understanding Hepatitis C" Survey Findings

Three new surveys of 150 health care providers and 499 people living with HCV in the United States revealed that people with the condition continue to struggle with the disease and its treatment.

These surveys indicated that patients and health care providers are looking for new treatment options, with nearly half of treated U.S. patients voicing dissatisfaction with their interferon therapy, and 61 percent of patients saying that the side effects are the strongest drawback of this therapy. Health care providers acknowledged the impact of side effects on their patients. Ninety-two percent (92%) agreed that certain side effects from interferon

therapy worsen around the time of injection and, due to this, the majority (63 percent) recommend that patients always inject interferon therapy at the end of the working week so side effects occur over the weekend or during time off work. Many patients are unhappy that their time off with family is often spent recovering from interferon side effects.

Both patients and health care providers are eager to identify new treatment options that lessen the burden of side effects. The surveys showed that the majority of patients (57 percent) and health care providers (51 percent) reported that reducing the side effects is a desired improvement to current interferon therapy.

"Clearly, hepatitis C treatment greatly impacts a patient's life both emotionally and physically. As new treatments become available, it will be important to evaluate whether they can reduce the burden of side effects to patients, including activities of daily living, while preserving the effectiveness of treatment," said Monica Burke, RN, MPH, Temple University, Department of Medicine, Gastroenterology Section.

The survey was funded by Novartis and Human Genome Sciences (HGS), conducted by market research vendors TNS and Synovate, and developed with input from several health care providers including Dr. Douglas Dieterich (Professor of Medicine, Division of Hepatology, Mount Sinai School of Medicine), Dr. Robert Gish (Hepatologist and Medical Director of the Liver Disease Management and Transplant Program, California Pacific Medical Center) and Monika Burke (RN and MPH, Temple University, Department of Medicine, Gastroenterology).