

Wiping Out Hep C in New Mexico

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President's Message

This has been a busy and productive month for the Alliance. In addition to our varied advocacy activities (see column 2), we are taking advantage of every opportunity to get out into the public to spread awareness about hepatitis C through health fairs, speaking engagements, and other community events. We find that the general public as a whole knows very little about the disease and most don't realize why they should be tested for it. An estimated two thirds of infected individuals are unaware of their HCV status. This is largely because too many people don't believe they've ever been at risk for infection so they don't get tested. Not to mention that hepatitis C testing is not routine, so some people mistakenly assume they've already been checked for the disease. This is why we seize every opportunity to get out "into the trenches" ourselves and educate the public about the truth related to hepatitis C.

The important thing to remember about HCV is that when people know they are infected, they have the power to alter the progression of the disease. Whether through lifestyle changes, pegylated interferon combination therapy and the use of alternative methods of healing such as herbs and supplements or all of the above. The truth is that in many cases, hepatitis C can be controlled and probably won't become life-threatening for the majority of those who have it *and take care of themselves*. Do your own research and don't forget to call us for information.

Please remember that you are not alone, and there is hope!

HCV-State of the State

Karen Gonzales, Hepatitis C Coordinator, New Mexico Department of Health

Hepatitis Prevention Program in New Mexico

HCV has been a growing concern in New Mexico since the mid-1990s. The Epidemiology and Response Division estimates that between 24,000—28,000 people are chronically infected with hepatitis C in NM. The Hepatitis Program strives to prevent transmission of viral hepatitis and reduce the negative health consequences associated with hepatitis A, B, and C. Hepatitis testing, vaccine, and educational services are provided to high-risk adults including anyone who has ever injected drugs, persons who share crack/meth pipes or intranasal inhalant equipment, men who have sex with men (MSM) or bisexual men, sex partners of MSM or bisexual men, people who are HCV positive, people who are HIV positive, persons who received a blood transfusion before July 1992, heterosexuals with multiple sex partners or who have been diagnosed with an STD, and sexual or household contacts of acute or chronic cases of hepatitis B. Contact your local health office for testing and vaccination details.

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NMHCA Advocates for You

Laura Tomedi, Advocacy Committee Co-Chair

The advocacy committee has been hard at work to educate our policy makers on the importance of making Hepatitis C a priority. Activities we've completed include:

- Mailed letters to NM State Legislators and Governor Richardson requesting increased access to hepatitis C treatment and substance use treatment and increased hepatitis C prevention outreach to substance users.
- Signed on to the Caring Ambassadors/Hep C Appropriations Partnership/National Hepatitis C Advocacy Council letter to President Bush requesting that May be declared National Hepatitis Awareness Month.
- Signed on as a supporting organization to the New Mexico Drug Policy Alliance's legislative endeavors.
- Signed on to the Harm Reduction Coalition letter to Secretary Leavitt of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, encouraging a stronger harm reduction-based interest in opiate overdoses.

We're planning an "Advocacy Forum" for NMHPA members and our partners to draft next year's letter to the New Mexico State Legislature. Hope to see you all there!

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In the News

Compiled by Stephani Patten, NMHCA Vice President

Heavy-Drinking Women with HCV Infection Cut Decade Off Life (Source: Hepatitis C Assn.) ARLINGTON, VA., Jan. 25 -- Women with hepatitis C viral infections who drink heavily squander their normal survival advantage over men with the same infections, investigators here found.

Heavy-drinking HCV-infected women died more than a decade earlier than HCV-infected women who drank only moderately or not at all, reported Chiung M. Chen, M.A., and colleagues, in the February issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*.

The findings suggest that alcohol affects men and women with HCV differently, and provides further evidence that heavy drinking contributes to HCV-related disease progression and death, the investigators said.

"Previous studies indicated that alcohol use is a risk factor for HCV disease progression, but they seldom examined the effect on women and men separately," said Chen, an analyst at the research firm CSR, Inc. based here. "Even fewer studies were able to examine the effect of alcohol on HCV mortality. Our study provides empirical evidence to fill the gap."

Rapid Decline of HCV RNA in Patients Treated with VX-950 VX-950 (now named telaprevir) is an oral antiviral agent that specifically inhibits the NS3/4A protease of hepatitis C virus (HCV). Data presented at several recent conferences show that VX-950 has antiviral activity in vitro and in humans.

Results from a Phase I, placebo-controlled, double-blind clinical trial of VX-950 were published in the October 2006 issue of *Gastroenterology*. The study evaluated the antiviral activity, pharmacokinetics, and safety of VX-950 in 34 patients with chronic genotype 1 HCV; 27 (79%) had failed prior hepatitis C treatment. Participants were randomly assigned to receive placebo or VX-950 at one of the following doses for 14 days: 450 mg every 8 hours; 750 mg every 8 hours; 1250 mg every 12 hours.

In conclusion, the authors wrote, "VX-950 was well tolerated and demonstrated substantial antiviral activity. Some patients had viral breakthrough during dosing, related to selection of variants with decreased sensitivity to VX-950. The results support further studies of VX-950 in patients with chronic hepatitis C."

Calendar of Events

NMHCA Board Meetings are held on the third Tuesday of every month at the UNM-HSC PROJECT ECHO Teleconference Center at 2:30 pm.

The Hepatitis C Support Group at the University of New Mexico Hospital is held on the third Tuesday of every month at 5 pm in the Manzano Room (2nd floor behind the cafeteria).

HCV-State of the State *(continued)*

2007 Legislative Update

Two bills that pertain directly to HCV treatment and care are now before the State Legislature: HBI 74, sponsored by Rep. Edward C. Sandoval (D-Bern.-17), calls for \$1.6M to continue funding chronic disease management sites throughout New Mexico. Through a partnership between NMDOH; NM Corrections Department; NM Primary Care Association; and UNM Health Sciences Center, hepatitis C treatment and chronic disease case management are provided to uninsured people living in rural areas. HB 174 has passed the House Health and Government Affairs Committee and is awaiting hearing by the House Appropriations and Finance Committee. SB 281, sponsored by Senator Nancy Rodriguez (D-Santa Fe — 24), requests \$2M to expand the UNM Extensions for Community Health Outcomes Program. SB 218 is currently awaiting hearing by the Senate Finance Committee.

Upcoming HCV Training

An HCV *Train the Trainer* program is scheduled in Albuquerque, NM on June 8, 2007. This full day training will provide information on HCV transmission, prevention, disease process, and treatment. Participants will also receive resources and material to take back to their local communities. More information will be available in the coming weeks. Contact Karen Gonzales at (505) 476-3076 if you are interested in attending this training or if you would like to schedule training in your community.

NMDOH Harm Reduction Program

The Harm Reduction Program (HRP) works to reduce drug-related harm while enhancing individual, family, and community wellness, primarily through the provision of linguistically appropriate and culturally competent services to injection drug users (IDU). The HRP focuses on preventing the spread of hepatitis C, HIV and other blood-borne pathogens by providing syringe exchange and related harm reduction services statewide. These services are provided by community-based organizations (CBO) and regional public health offices (RHO). Additionally, the HRP facilitates services to individuals whose drugs of choice are crack-cocaine or methamphetamine. CBO and RHO also provide overdose prevention trainings for opiate users that include prescribing the opiate antagonist Naloxone, which reverses the respiratory depression effect of an opiate overdose. To-date, there are 31 syringe exchange sites statewide supported by the Harm Reduction Program, with further expansion anticipated in the coming months.

On March 23rd, the HRP will convene a statewide meeting in Albuquerque. This meeting will focus on trainings including harm reduction, overdose prevention, hepatitis C, and acu-detox. For more information, call Bernie Lieving at 827-2363.



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OUR MISSION: To create, coordinate and inspire participation in the "parade" that will bring individual, community, state, and national awareness and resources to hepatitis C prevention and treatment

OUR VISION: A compassionate, non-judgmental society that ensures education and universal, equitable access to resources to prevent, manage, and cure HCV infection, and support all of those infected and affected by this disease