

National charity warns of need to prevent escalating costs of hepatitis C

New government stats show cancer-causing virus hepatitis C could cost more than £176 million in transplants alone by 2020

Embargoed until 00.01, 28th July 2011: World Hepatitis Day

Responding to new Health Protection Agency figures released today which project dramatic increases in demand for liver transplants due to undiagnosed and untreated hepatitis C, UK charity The Hepatitis C Trust warns that without more testing and treatment thousands more will die of this curable virus.

Prime Minister David Cameron said today: "With more people being tested for hepatitis C, and treatments improving all the time, an early diagnosis can make a real difference. But it's critical that people who could be at risk continue to be tested, as it's a disease which can go undetected for years. We are looking at how we can strengthen efforts to prevent and control hepatitis C in the future, as part of our strategy for combating liver disease.

"But today, on World Hepatitis Day, I urge everyone who could be at risk to go and get checked out."

Read the PM's message of support for World Hepatitis Day here

<http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-message-of-support-for-world-hepatitis-day/>

Hepatitis C is one of the only viruses in the world that can be cured, yet low diagnosis rates are putting an unnecessary burden on local health services and the NHS budget as a whole. Last year 107 liver transplants were undertaken for people with hepatitis C but the UK Health Protection Agency now estimate that this will rise to 466 per year – 4,200 by 2020.

"Every transplant costs in excess of £50,000 – that's more than ten times the cost of treatment that could cure about half of these people", says Charles Gore, Chief Executive of The Hepatitis C Trust and President of the World Hepatitis Alliance. "People should not be dying of this preventable, treatable, curable disease. Many of these expensive transplants can be avoided by measures to diagnose and treat hepatitis C. However, of the 216,000 people living with the virus in England just 3% are being treated each year. This is a huge waste of money, a huge waste of life.

"We welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to addressing hepatitis C. The Health Protection Agency's report today underscores the importance of tackling this significant public health issue. Liver disease is already the only one of 5 major killer diseases in this country that's still rising and there aren't enough donor livers to go around. With soaring rates of alcohol- and obesity-related liver disease, hundreds more people each year will be dying unnecessarily on the waiting list" Gore concludes.

These new figures are released on World Hepatitis Day, the first since its official adoption by all 193 World Health Organization member states. One of just four official health days for specific diseases, this brings global recognition of viral hepatitis in line with that of HIV, TB and Malaria.

Leading consultant hepatologist and transplant physician Dr Kosh Agarwal from King's College Hospital Foundation Trust said: "It is a tragedy that more and more people with hepatitis C are needing liver transplants and that many are dying waiting for this life-saving operation. If we can test and diagnose patients earlier, and they are referred to specialist services and treated, we can avoid the need for transplantation, save lives and make the best use of scarce resources."

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Notes to editors:

About The Hepatitis C Trust

The Hepatitis C Trust is the national UK charity for hepatitis C. It is committed to reversing the steeply rising death toll from hepatitis C and it provides information, support and representation for all those affected by this disease. Started by patients, almost all of its governing Board of Trustees, its paid staff and its volunteers are patients.

www.hepctrust.org.uk

Helpline: 0845 223 4424

About hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus that predominantly infects the cells of the liver. If left untreated, the virus can cause cirrhosis, liver cancer and death. There is no vaccine but early treatment can successfully clear the virus in around half of patients and ongoing infection can be managed.

The Health Protection Agency estimate that there are around 250,000 hepatitis C positive people in the UK although some estimates put this number as high as 466,000. Less than 100,000 people in England and Wales have been diagnosed.

Risk factors:

- Receiving a blood transfusion / blood products / organ transplantation prior to 1992
- Current IV drug use / past IV drug use (including steroids, even once and sharing any injecting equipment)
- Current / past cocaine sniffing (sharing notes or straws with a person who is known to have hepatitis C or may have been at risk. This may also apply to crack cocaine pipes)
- Blood transfusions or invasive medical or dental procedures outside of Western Europe and North America
- Tattoos / piercings/ acupuncture (in unregistered premises or with possibly unsterile or re-used equipment)
- Having regularly shared razors or toothbrushes (with a person who is known to have hepatitis C or may have been at risk)

Celebrities with hepatitis C:

Dame Anita Roddick, Pamela Anderson, Keith Richards, Natalie Cole, Anthony Kiedis and Marianne Faithfull have all been diagnosed with hepatitis C.

Facts for World Hepatitis Day:

- Last year World Hepatitis Day became one of just four official World Health Organisation (WHO) days for specific diseases, bringing recognition of viral hepatitis in line with that of HIV, TB and Malaria in all 193 WHO countries.
- 1 in 12 people worldwide is living with hepatitis B or C. A million people die every year as a result. Yet these are preventable, treatable diseases.
- In the UK at least 500,000 people have hepatitis B or C. Less than half of them have been diagnosed.
- A third of the world's population has been exposed to hepatitis B at some point in their life. Only tobacco causes more cancer globally.
- 170 million people worldwide are estimated to be living with chronic hepatitis C. It is the leading cause of liver transplant in Europe.