Five Goals of the New National Plan to End Viral Hepatitis

The Viral Hepatitis National Strategic Plan for the United States, released by HHS, offers a road map for the next five years.

January 8, 2021 By Trent Straube

As we enter a new year, a new administration will soon take over the White House and a new national plan will address the public health threat that is viral hepatitis. This week, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) released the Viral Hepatitis National Strategic Plan for the United States: A Roadmap to Elimination 2021–2025.

Viral hepatitis attacks the liver, a vital organ that acts as the body's filter. In fact, hepatitis means "inflammation of the liver." Over time, it can be deadly. The viruses are spread differently, ranging from contaminated food and water (like hepatitis A) to blood transfusions and shared needles (hepatitis C).

According to HHS, it's estimated that as of 2016, nearly 3.3 million people in the United States were living with chronic viral hepatitis—862,000 with hepatitis B and 2.4 million with hepatitis C. So it follows that the nation needs a strong strategy to attack this disease.

Building on three similar plans from the past decade, the updated 72-page hepatitis strategy focuses on the three most common of the five hepatitis viruses: hepatitis A, B and C viruses, also referred to as HAV, HBV and HCV. The plan lists five main goals for the next five years:

- Prevent new viral hepatitis infections.
- Improve viral hepatitis–related health outcomes of people with viral hepatitis.
- Reduce viral hepatitis–related disparities and health inequities.
- Improve viral hepatitis surveillance and data use.

- Achieve integrated, coordinated efforts that address the viral hepatitis epidemics among all partners and stakeholders.

“The human and economic consequences of viral hepatitis epidemics are steep. Viral hepatitis is a public health threat that puts people who are infected at increased risk for liver disease, cancer and death, affects the quality of life for millions of Americans, and costs the health care system billions of dollars annually,” said Admiral Brett P. Giroir, MD, assistant secretary for health, in an HHS press release. “The nation is losing ground in the fight against viral hepatitis despite safe and effective hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccines, and a hepatitis C cure that works after an eight-week course of medicine.”

The AIDS Institute, a national nonprofit, said the new plan lays the groundwork for eliminating hepatitis. “But it cannot be accomplished without strong leadership and a dramatic increase in funding dedicated to this cause,” said Rachel Klein, deputy executive director at The AIDS Institute. “We urge President-elect Biden and congressional leaders to prioritize the elimination of epidemics such as viral hepatitis, HIV and sexually transmitted diseases that disproportionately impact minority communities in an effort to address racial equity.”

Health experts estimate that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention needs about $4 billion over the next decade to properly respond to the nation’s hepatitis epidemic. However, as The AIDS Institute points out, the CDC is slated to receive only $39 million this year for viral hepatitis, and Congress has earmarked just $13 million to deal with infectious diseases that arise from the opioid crisis.

“HHS has diligently worked with federal, state and local government entities as well as patient advocates to craft a strong and widely supported plan,” said Frank Hood, manager of hepatitis advocacy at The AIDS Institute. “But without vastly increased funding, we cannot realize the promise of a viral hepatitis–free America.”

According to HHS, data from 2014 to 2018 in the United States show that:

- The rate of new hepatitis A cases increased by 850%;
- The rate of acute hepatitis B increased by 11%;
- And the rate of acute hepatitis C cases increased by 71%.

To learn more about hepatitis, including hep A, B and C as well as non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD), non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH), alcoholic liver disease and other types, check out

the Hepatitis Basics in HepMag.com. People living with HIV often have problems that affect the liver, including viral hepatitis and fatty liver. To learn more, see the POZ Basics on HIV and Your Liver.

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