

The New Old Disease: Hepatitis C

By Aimee Swartz

Closing the Gap, First Summit Packs the House • January/February 2003

As a disease that has infected nearly four million Americans, a disproportionate number of whom are African American and Hispanic, hepatitis C is deservedly gaining attention in the research and the public health arenas.

The hepatitis C virus (HCV) causes inflammation of the liver. The majority of people infected with HCV experience chronic infection (defined as detection of the virus in the blood over a 6-month period) with no symptoms. If symptoms are present, they may be very mild and flu-like, such as nausea, fatigue, loss of appetite, fever, headaches, and abdominal pain. HCV virus is now the most common blood-borne infection in the U.S. Infection now occurs mostly through injection drug use, high-risk sexual behaviors, occupational exposures such as accidental needle sticks and mother-to-infant transmission.

HCV's incubation period varies from two to 26 weeks. Liver enzyme test results may vary from being elevated to normal for weeks or even a year. During this period, the virus is in the blood and may be causing liver cell damage, and the infected person can transmit the disease to others. The good news is that in 1995 an antibody test for HCV was finally implemented nationwide. However, the majority of people infected with HCV go undetected until their liver is involved.

"African Americans, in particular, have been shown to underutilize screening and treatment services and often present with more advanced disease than Caucasians," said Thelma King Thiel, chairman and CEO, Hepatitis Foundation. "Rates of infection are high, and outcomes are often worse."

Kicking Hepatitis C

In response to this issue, the Hepatitis Foundation partnered with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to develop HCV prevention videos. The videos are aimed at catching people before they become infected and emphasize prevention. "Hepatitis C must be a priority," said Thiel. "Awareness of the disease is so low, which is why we've developed our educational videos."

Community-based STD clinics are encouraged to show *The Invisible Threat* and *The Silent Stalker* to teach clients how to avoid high-

risk behaviors and symptoms of the virus. "We try to show them the importance of the liver because many people just don't know," said Thiel. "Children, especially, don't understand the importance of their livers."

The Hepatitis Foundation also produced a video aimed at children and youth, *Respect Yourself—Protect Yourself*. The video promotes taking responsibility for one's own health care and helps teens identify risky behaviors and liver-damaging activities.

"We have to start lifestyle changes before kids are involved in high-risk behaviors," Thiel explained. "We have an obligation to help kids stay healthy."

The videos, which are available in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Mandarin, as well as an "urban" version, can be found on the Hepatitis Foundation website.

In October 2002, the Foundation launched a partnership through which middle schools and high schools in Montgomery County, MD, will adopt a liver wellness program using information and videos provided by the Hepatitis Foundation. "We anticipate that this kind of collaboration will really take off in schools throughout the county," Thiel said. "Our videos have been recognized by the CDC, as well as other health agencies, for being an excellent resource in promoting hepatitis C prevention."

"We need to change the way people think about hepatitis C. We need to think more about prevention and diagnosis than treatment," Thiel said. "It is crucial to catch it before it becomes chronic. We need to prevent it, but if we miss out there, then we need to diagnose it within the first two weeks."

The Hepatitis Foundation also provides education, training programs, and materials for the public, patients, health educators, and medical professionals. In addition, it supports hepatitis research and maintains a patient support network, a toll-free hotline, a database of hepatitis support groups and a comprehensive website.

For more information about the Hepatitis Foundation, go to <http://www.hepatitisfoundation.org> or call 800-891-0707.

For more information about the CDC's hepatitis programming, call 888-4-HEP-CDC. ❖



*The New Old Disease: Hepatitis C is based on the Summit workshop
The New Old Disease: Hepatitis C, Wednesday, July 10, 2002.*

