

Media Release [Embargoed until 00:01am May 17]

Survey reveals widespread ignorance about hepatitis

A new survey has found that most Queenslanders do not know that hepatitis B and C can cause cancer, or that medical treatment is available.

The survey released at the beginning of National Hepatitis Awareness Week 17-23 May reveals that 65 per cent of Queenslanders do not know that the hepatitis B and C viruses can cause cancer. It also finds that 53 per cent do not know that effective hepatitis B treatment is available, and 82 per cent are not aware that hepatitis C can be treated and cured.

The Hepatitis Council of Queensland estimates that up to 90 per cent of the 371,700 Australians currently living with chronic hepatitis B or C have never received treatment. In Queensland, there are almost 4,000 new diagnoses of hepatitis B or C each year.

Hepatitis B and C are transmitted by blood-to-blood contact, and hepatitis B is also sexually transmitted and can be transmitted at birth. However, more than half of people surveyed cannot correctly identify how the viruses are transmitted and do not know about symptoms.

Clint Ferndale, CEO of the Hepatitis Council of Queensland, says the statistics are alarming.

“Unmanaged or untreated, hepatitis B or C can lead to severe liver disease and liver cancer. Globally 1.5 million people die every year from these viruses and they are the top two indications for liver transplant in Australia,” he said.

“Australia is now on the brink of a viral hepatitis crisis. The mortality, morbidity, and health care costs are astronomical.

“Queensland Health has achieved a great deal in this area, but we are calling on state and federal governments to radically increase viral hepatitis funding now. This survey shows that 82 per cent of Queenslanders believe there is not enough public education about hepatitis B or C.”

Dr Graeme Macdonald, hepatologist and liver transplant physician at the Princess Alexandra Hospital, agrees.

“The knowledge gaps revealed by this survey may partly explain why most Australians with chronic hepatitis B or C have never received treatment. If we can take any comfort from this survey, it is that 85 per cent of Queenslanders do know that the first step in diagnosing these viruses is to get a blood test,” he said.

The survey of 1,000 Australians was commissioned by Hepatitis Australia. World Hepatitis Day is 19 May with National Hepatitis Awareness Week 17-23 May. For more information about viral hepatitis visit www.hepqld.asn.au or call 1300 HEP ABC (1300 437 222).

Spokespeople available, including people living with hepatitis or who have had treatment.

To co-ordinate an interview, or for more information, contact:

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