

## Eradicating Hepatitis C in Western Australia

### Key Points

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- Hepatitis C is a major public health challenge and a significant cost burden to the health system.
- The listing of new, effective treatments on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme provides a limited opportunity to contribute to international goal to eradicate the virus by 2030.
- Hepatitis C treatment initiation rates in Western Australia are low and continue to drop. There are clear barriers to accessing treatment, particularly for injecting drug users, who account for approximately 90 percent of hepatitis C transmissions.
- Providing targeted, minimal, investment to alcohol and other drug treatment services has the potential to reverse this downward trend, deliver significant cost savings to the health budget and support a systemic, cross-sector response to this critical population health issue.

Minimal State Government investment will ensure this straight forward intervention will save lives, and significant health costs, and will assist WA to meet the international target. This support will:

- o ensure all injecting drug users in contact with alcohol and other drug services are educated (included through peer education) about the availability of improved hepatitis C treatment options;
- o support alcohol and other drug services' efforts to reach past service users who have identified as having injected;
- o train existing alcohol and other drug sector staff in, or employ, a phlebotomist at alcohol and other drug treatment services to:
  - provide tailored pre- and post-testing information, to take bloods at the service, and provide individual advocacy/systems navigation support as needed to access hepatitis C treatment; and
  - support capacity building of cross-sector services (from aged care, homeless services, etc) to engage in this initiative and strengthen shared care.
- o cover the approx. \$6 per month dispensing fee as needed to minimise any financial barrier to accessing hepatitis C treatment.

WANADA is calling for an investment of approximately \$5.4 million over three years for 15 x FTE state-wide, training/professional development, resource development and evaluation.

### Background

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#### Impact of Hepatitis C

There are over 20,000 notifications of Western Australians that have chronic hepatitis C. The actual number of people with chronic hepatitis C is unknown due to limited screening.

At least half of those infected with hepatitis C will go on to experience liver disease, with 20 percent developing cirrhosis after 40 years of infection.<sup>i</sup>

Injecting drug users are at extremely high risk of infection. Approximately 90 percent of hepatitis C transmissions are attributable to drug injection.<sup>ii</sup>

## Efforts to Achieve Elimination by 2030

The Australian Government listed a new generation of direct-acting antiviral medications on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme from March 2016 at the cost of \$1 billion over five years.<sup>iii</sup> By making these new generation drugs available to all people without exception (including current drug users), Australia has the potential to lead the world in its efforts to eliminate hepatitis C by 2030.

Australia is one of only nine countries currently on track with its eradication efforts.<sup>iv</sup> Recent developments, however, indicate that:

- this success has been primarily due to engagement with “easier to reach” population groups; and
- treatment rates have been steadily declining since March 2016.<sup>v</sup>

In Western Australia, only 22 percent of those diagnosed as having chronic hepatitis C initiated treatment between 2016 and 2018. Over this timeframe, the estimated number of people initiating treatment in Western Australia dropped from around 300 per month, to just over 100 per month.<sup>vi</sup>

## Systemic Barriers Inhibiting Eradication Efforts

Addressing complex, chronic health issues for current and previous injecting drug users is difficult. Many barriers impede individuals from accessing screening and treatment, in particular:

- misconceptions amongst injecting drug users regarding: hepatitis C transmission; symptoms; clinical markers and treatment;<sup>vii</sup>
- stigma (both real and perceived) that inhibits injecting drug users’ access to health services including those exiting corrections; and
- the absence of a health focussed cross-sector systems approach to addressing alcohol and other drug related issues.

## Supporting Alcohol and Other Drug Services to Eradicate Hepatitis C

Alcohol and other drug sector has a key role in the success of the hepatitis C elimination initiative. The sector is uniquely placed to: engage current and past injecting drug users; access peer networks; and reduce the barriers to treatment.

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<sup>i</sup> Dore, G. J., Freeman, A. J., Law, M. & Kaldor, J. M., 2002. Is severe liver disease a common outcome for people with chronic hepatitis C?, *Journal of Gastroenterology and Hepatology*, 17, 423-430.

<sup>ii</sup> National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research, 2002. HIV/AIDS, viral hepatitis and sexually transmissible infections in Australia: Annual Surveillance Report 2002, National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research, University of New South Wales, Sydney.

<sup>iii</sup> Australian Government, 2015. Turnbull Government Invests over \$1 Billion to Cure Hep C, 22 December 2015. Accessed 6 September 2018. <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/ministers/publishing.nsf/Content/health-mediarel-yr2015-ley154.htm>

<sup>iv</sup> Polaris Observatory, 2018. Countries on track to achieve WHO elimination targets. Accessed 6 September 2018 <http://cdafound.org/polaris/>

<sup>v</sup> Hepatitis Australia, 2017. Australia currently on track to eliminate hepatitis C by 2030, but challenges remain for hepatitis B. Accessed 6 September 2018. <https://www.hepatitisaustralia.com/newsarticles/australia-currently-on-track-to-eliminate-hepatitis-c-by-2030-but-challenges-remain-for-hepatitis-b/2/11/2017>

<sup>vi</sup> The Kirby Institute, 2018. Monitoring hepatitis C treatment uptake in Australia (Issue 9). The Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney, p.2.

<sup>vii</sup> O’Brien, S., Day, C., Black, E., Thetford, C., & Dolan, K., 2006. Injecting Drug Users’ Understanding of Hepatitis C, Technical Report No: 262. National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of New South Wales, p.38.