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For immediate release

Community pharmacies recruited for Waitemata DHB Hepatitis C screening pilot

A potentially life-saving Waitemata DHB-funded Hepatitis C screening programme will be trialled at seven west and north Auckland pharmacies from today.

Around 500 participants considered to be in the higher-risk categories will agree to a simple finger-prick test as part of the pilot study – the first of its kind to ever take place in New Zealand pharmacies.

Results will indicate whether further testing is required to diagnose the potentially fatal liver disease, Hepatitis C - putting patients who ultimately test positive on the pathway to treatment and, in most cases, a full cure.

An estimated 50,000 New Zealanders are thought to have Hepatitis C and only half are believed to know they are infected. An estimated 8000 people with Hepatitis C live within Waitemata DHB boundaries and approximately 5000 of them are undiagnosed.

Some may have been living with the condition for over two decades and not realised it.

“Most people don’t get any symptoms when they acquire Hepatitis C and the longer-term symptoms can take years to develop,” says Waitemata DHB Public Physician and pilot study co-investigator Dr Catherine Jackson.

“The first indication you might get is when you become really ill with a problem that you can’t do much about because it is too advanced. Hepatitis C is the leading cause of liver transplantation in New Zealand as well as a leading cause of liver cancer.”

Hepatitis C once had a high mortality rate. But a cure is now more than 97% likely in many cases with just 12 weeks of modern treatment - vastly improved on historic approaches that were not always effective and had a range of unpleasant side effects.

Dr Jackson says Hepatitis C can carry a level of stigma that sometimes stops people seeking treatment.

People can, for example, contract Hepatitis C from contact with infected blood through unsafe tattooing practices, sharing IV needles, or after receiving medical care in high-risk countries.

Pilot study lead investigator and pharmacist Dr Natalie Gauld says the use of community-based pharmacies is designed to make screening more accessible and help destigmatise the process.

“Everybody visits a pharmacy at some stage – whether it is in a mall or on a street corner.

“People wanting to participate in this trial will simply walk in, get some written information, sign consent, fill out a brief questionnaire and get their finger-prick test – plus, it will all happen in a private room to ensure their privacy is safeguarded throughout.”

Dr Jackson says the potential for a more permanent screening programme will be explored once the pilot is complete.

“We will want to see how many people took the opportunity to be tested and will talk to the pharmacies also to find out what did and didn’t work for them,” she says.

“Effective screening for Hepatitis C could make a huge difference in many people’s lives. If you can catch it and cure it early, then you can avoid an enormous amount of pain and suffering.

“Anyone who is worried that they might have Hepatitis C should speak to their GP about being tested. Early detection and treatment is important.”

Waitemata DHB CEO Dr Dale Bramley says the pilot is another example of the DHB expanding community services in an effort to make healthcare more equitable and accessible for everyone.

“Our primary care health partners - in this case, pharmacists - are equally committed to delivering best care to every single one of our patients.

“This pilot does that by providing easily-accessed local care options for a group of people who have, for a variety of reasons, sometimes been hesitant to seek help.

“There have been huge advances in the diagnosis and successful treatment of Hepatitis C through time and it’s important to do all that we can to prevent needless suffering and improve outcomes for those who are affected.”

Ends

Hepatitis C risk factor check list:

- Have you ever had a tattoo or body piercing using unsterile equipment?
- Have you had a blood transfusion before 1992?
- Have you ever injected drugs?
- Have you ever lived or had medical treatment in a high-risk country (e.g. Pakistan, Egypt, Eastern Europe including Russia, developing countries in Africa and Asia)?
- Have you ever been in prison?
- Were you born to a mother with hepatitis C?

For further information, contact:

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