

Summit Raises Awareness in Health Community About Hepatitis C

Nov. 7, more than 120 physicians, nurses, social workers and other health professionals gathered at Thwing Center on the Case Western Reserve University campus to participate in the 2003 Hepatitis C Summit. They met to learn about the medical, economic and social impact of Hepatitis C, to review the latest options for therapeutic interventions, and to engage in an assessment of community needs and plans to further control its spread and consequences for health. The conference was organized by the Case Center for Science, Health and Society with cooperation and support from the Cleveland Department of Public Health, the Northern Ohio Chapter of the American Liver Foundation, the Ohio Department of Health, and the National Association of County and City Health Officials.

More than 3.9 million Americans, including more than 200,000 Ohioans, have been infected with Hepatitis C. More than 2.7 million Americans are infected on a chronic basis.

“Hepatitis C frequently occurs in an insidious form until it results in more serious problems, such as cirrhosis, liver failure, and liver cancer,” said Nathan A. Berger, M.D., director of the Center for Science, Health and Society.

Alan P. Brownstein, president and chief executive officer of the American Liver Foundation, based in New York City, said, “People in Ohio need a wake-up call on Hepatitis C.” He said that four times the number of people are infected with Hepatitis C as are infected with HIV. He explained that, although the incidence of the infection is decreasing, a vast reservoir of the virus is present in people who were infected years ago. “And the vast majority of them don’t know they have it,” he said.

Brownstein said that although the virus can infect people from all walks of life, “from the Vietnam veteran living in Cleveland to the soccer mom living in Hudson,” some populations are difficult to reach. To help health professionals reach high-risk populations with prevention and treatment messages about Hepatitis C, his organization has developed the Hepatitis Integration Training Manual (HITM), containing educational materials. He hopes to create a sense of urgency among health professionals and the community, tempered with a sense of hope because treatments are available and people can make lifestyle changes to help themselves.

Populations especially prone to Hepatitis C infection are injection drug users and patients whose immune systems are compromised, such as those with HIV. Among prison inmates, more than 50 percent of women and 35 percent of men are infected with Hepatitis C, said Berger.

Since 1992, when routine testing of blood products for Hepatitis C was introduced, the incidence of new infections with Hepatitis C has markedly decreased, but the prevalence of chronic infection continues to result in 8,000 to 10,000 deaths annually. Hepatitis C remains the most common chronic blood-borne infection in the United States.

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