

## Hepatitis C infection – the end is nigh



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Chronic infection with the hepatitis C virus (HCV) is common in people who use drugs. Untreated a larger proportion of those who are infected will develop cirrhosis and liver cancer and for all too many the infection will prove fatal. For the last two decades treatment of hepatitis C has involved a long course, up to 18 months, of very unpleasant drugs with a whole range of side effects. For those who were able to tolerate the treatment the cure rate was less than 70%. Faced with a slowly progressive disease that kills in over 30 years, a prolonged course of therapy with relatively ineffective, toxic drugs it is no surprise to find that most patients declined treatment. An unfortunate consequence of this has been the increased spread of HCV with more and more infected people infecting more and more friends and partners.

All of this is about to change. The last few years has seen a transformation of treatments available for people with HCV and new 'tablet only' treatments are available for all those who are infected. The new treatments require a short course of tablets (usually for 2-3 months) and are almost side effect free. The cure rates are in excess of 95%, meaning that just about everyone who starts treatment can complete the course without ill effects and with a very good chance of clearing the infection. The introduction of different drug treatments from different companies has led to welcome competition in the marketplace for anti-HCV treatments and the very high prices that initially restricted access to therapy have now been replaced by affordable treatments that are well within reach. High quality clinical trials have confirmed the effectiveness of these new treatments in people with addictive disorders and there is increasing evidence to show that treating people who are using drugs does not lead to high rates of re-infection. Indeed, all of the modelling completed to-date suggests that treating those who are actively using drugs will dramatically reduce onward transmission of hepatitis C and many experts see treatment in those with on-going drug use as the key to control of the hepatitis C epidemic.

We now have affordable drugs that can cure drug users with hepatitis C. We now have data to show that treating and curing drug users does not lead to reinfection and we now have models to show that treating those who continue to inject drugs is likely to lead to a dramatic fall in the spread of this virus. To take full advantage of the opportunities to eradicate hepatitis C from our communities we now need a concerted effort from health authorities, governments and activists to make sure that everyone is aware of the huge advantages of treating people with addictive disorders and we need a major increase in access to hepatitis C treatments to rid our societies of the scourge of this cancer causing virus.