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Hepatitis C deserves the attention

MICHAEL NINBURG, GUEST COLUMNIST Published 10:00 pm, Wednesday, June 6, 2007

"We stand at the precipice of a grave threat to our public health ... it affects people from all walks of life, in every state, in every country. And unless we do something about it soon, it will kill more people than AIDS." Those words were spoken more than seven years ago by former Surgeon General **C. Everett Koop** and many people will be surprised to learn he was speaking about hepatitis C.

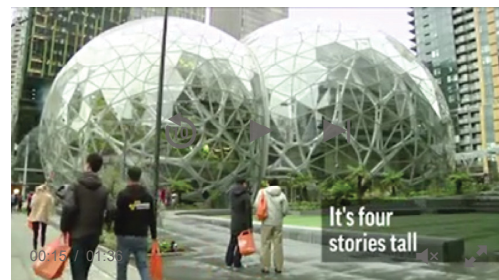
Here in Washington we are finally beginning to heed Koop's advice. Last week, coinciding with the end of Viral Hepatitis Awareness Month, the **Washington State Department of Health** convened its second statewide hepatitis C conference. Public health workers, advocates and medical professionals from around the state met in Seattle to discuss ways to better address this looming public health threat.

Hepatitis C is transmitted by blood-to-blood contact and is the most common blood-borne infection in the U.S. About 5 million Americans have been infected with the hepatitis C virus, or almost 2 percent of the population. Most of those with hepatitis C are unaware of their infection because they often remain asymptomatic for decades. And most of those people will also live normal, relatively healthy lives and die from causes unrelated to their hepatitis C. Unfortunately, about 20 percent to 30 percent eventually will develop cirrhosis of the liver and some of those will die from end-stage liver disease.



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The good news is that much of the disease burden from hepatitis C is preventable. Early diagnosis allows people to take action that can slow disease progression. Avoiding alcohol and getting vaccinated against hepatitis A and B are two relatively simple actions that can improve medical outcomes.

Better news, though, is that for many people, hepatitis C is curable. In about half the people who undergo treatment for hepatitis C, the virus becomes undetectable. And the most recent research shows that for those who are treated successfully, the virus stays undetectable.

For people to be treated for hepatitis C, however, they have to be diagnosed. National prevalence data suggest that about 110,000 Washingtonians are living with hepatitis C. Of those, about 70,000 are unaware of their infection. Those people can transmit the virus to others unwittingly and unknowingly do things to exacerbate their own liver damage.

Our challenge is twofold: We must get those undiagnosed individuals tested and we must make sure that everyone with hepatitis C has access to proper medical care.

We are encouraged by recent developments in this state and in our nation's capital. This past session, the Washington Legislature appropriated \$400,000 to the state Department of Health to begin implementation of our state [Hepatitis C Strategic Plan](#), which includes testing, education and prevention efforts.

And two weeks ago, U.S. Sens. [Ted Kennedy](#), D-Mass., and [Kay Bailey Hutchison](#), R-Texas, re-introduced the [Hepatitis C Epidemic Control and Prevention Act](#), a bill that mirrors much of what our state plan would do, but on a national level. A bipartisan companion bill was reintroduced in the [House of Representatives](#).

Those developments and the heightened awareness among public health professionals and the general public give us hope that we are on the right path to finally giving hepatitis C the attention it deserves.

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