

Jim's story: light on the other side

When the words "hepatitis C" first passed my ears they did exactly that, passed right on by. I didn't care much for whatever the doctor was trying to tell me, I knew nothing of hep C and I sure as hell didn't care much to find out either.

At the end of the day I figured I'm still standing, if the doc had forgotten to mention it, I and everyone else would still have been none the wiser. I was healthy with nothing going on to indicate anything let alone hep C – plus, what the hell do prison doctors know anyway?

How I got hep C to start with remains a mystery with plenty of possibilities. Shooting up in prison was never my thing but the old prison tattoo gun tore into my skin on more than a few occasions; add a few fights and all those delights and well, I'm surprised I didn't get a few other hep types to go with my C.

It wasn't till quite a few years later that the possibility of treatment for the hep C came around, and it wasn't due to a sudden desire to start looking after myself, you know, "treat your body as a temple" and all that.

I had been charged and imprisoned for armed robbery whilst "holidaying" in South Australia, my sentence was 16 years, with an eight year non-parole period. As my home was in NSW, the moment all court was over, I applied for an interstate transfer.

Four years later I found myself handcuffed and shackled on one of the last Ansett flights, being transferred to NSW.

At that time, prison hep C treatment required a series of blood tests and a liver biopsy – which was fun! My liver function test results were going to get me into the treatment and they had to be high. Yes, they were high and I was on the prison hep C treatment program!

Three injections a week, nine tablets a day, each and every day for six months. Absolute hell! No question about it. I can't remember ever feeling so continuously sick, 24 hours a day for six months. Living walking death, simple.

Three months into it you are tested to see if the treatment is working and if it's worth torturing yourself any further. I was one of the ones with another three months of treatment ahead of me – it was working.

Years later – sitting here writing this, I can thankfully say that the hep C has not been present in my body since I completed that program. I was tested at 3, 6, 9 and 18 months afterwards with all results showing negative for hep C.

The end result for me was great but for too many people there isn't even the chance to pursue a good result. Things have moved on from the old days and in lots of ways, treatment is easier to access. I've heard that only one or two in every hundred people with hep C have tried treatment. My treatment was tough but it worked and I often wonder why so many people are holding back from getting the treatment.

Jim, NSW

