



Media Release, May 18, 2009

Australian rock legends call for end to hepatitis 'silent epidemic'

National Awareness Week, May 18 to May 24, 2009

World Hepatitis Day, May 19, 2009

Iconic Australian rock stars will unite on World Hepatitis Day, May 19, to break the silence that surrounds hepatitis, the most common notifiable health condition in Australia in the last ten years. Criston Barker (ex Air Supply, Freeway and Ash), Russell Coleman (ex ACDC and Redgum) and Paul Stewart (ex Painters and Dockers), who have lived with, or are living with hepatitis C, are urging all Aussies to stem the silent epidemic of hepatitis by speaking out.

The rockers will be performing at tomorrow's concert, to be addressed by the Honourable Nicola Roxon MP, Minister for Health and Ageing.

In Australia, more than 200,000 people have chronic hepatitis C, and an estimated 160,000 Australians are living with chronic hepatitis B. Worldwide, one in 12 people are living with chronic hepatitis B or C.

At the end of 2008, 106,000 people in NSW had been notified as having been exposed to hepatitis C infection and around 80,000 of those people are living with chronic hepatitis C. It is estimated that around 4,000 new HCV transmissions occur in NSW each year.

"There is not enough said about it, and not enough done about it," said Criston Barker.

"People shouldn't be afraid to discuss hepatitis. I was notified of my hepatitis C in 1990 and within eight years I required a liver transplant. Four years after that, my hep C came back with a vengeance, and I elected to undergo treatment. I have been clear for five years now and my life is fantastic," he said.

"Criston's story highlights that hepatitis need not be a life sentence, and effective treatment is available," said Associate Professor Stuart Roberts, Director of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, The Alfred Hospital, Melbourne.

"Currently, only 2% of Australians with chronic hepatitis C are receiving treatment,¹ despite antiviral treatment providing a cure in 50% or 80% of cases, depending on the strain of hepatitis.

"Recent data shows that if treated early, 7 out of 10 people with the most difficult to treat strain of hepatitis C were cured.²

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“Some people with hepatitis C risk ongoing liver disease, liver failure and ultimately liver transplant if they do not undergo timely treatment,” Prof. Roberts said.

Hepatitis C is the leading cause of liver transplants in Australia. Paul Stewart required a liver transplant two years ago as a result of his hepatitis C.

“My hep C was so developed, my liver so scarred, that I didn’t have the option of treatment, I had to undergo a liver transplant straight away. I was unfortunate enough to be looking down the barrel of what happens when hepatitis C takes hold,” he said.

According to Stuart Loveday, Vice President of Hepatitis Australia, while Australia has adopted a national strategy to combat hepatitis C, our approach to hepatitis B falls far short of the mark.

“Hepatitis B is a major concern for Australia and the Asia Pacific region. Unlike for hepatitis C, Australia still lacks a national strategy to respond to the hepatitis B epidemic,” he said.

Despite the alarmingly high number of Australians affected by viral hepatitis, awareness is low, and new infections continue to occur.

“10,000 Australians will get hepatitis C every year, and most of these will be young people,” said Stuart Loveday.

“People are largely unaware that hepatitis affects the liver, how it is transmitted or what the symptoms are. We recommend people go to their doctor or contact their local hepatitis council for more information,” he said.

Ends

For further information or to co-ordinate an interview, please contact:

Rachel Stanton on (02) 6232 4257 or 0402 463 764,
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Further information about hepatitis C can be found at www.hepatitisaustralia.com or you can call the national infoline, 1300 HEP ABC (1300 437 222).

References:

1. National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research. HIV/AIDS, viral hepatitis and sexually transmissible infections in Australia Annual Surveillance Report 2008. National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research, The University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW.
2. Cheng W et al. Presented at 44th EASL Annual Meeting; 22-26 April 2009; Copenhagen. Denmark. Poster.