

Media Release

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National Hepatitis Awareness Week May 17 – May 23 / World Hepatitis Day May 19

Public awareness of viral hepatitis dangerously low, says survey

The majority of people in NSW and the ACT do not know hepatitis C and hepatitis B can cause cancer or that treatment and cure is possible if a person has hepatitis C, according to a new national survey conducted by Hepatitis Australia.

The survey also found that common symptoms of viral hepatitis are largely unknown and concluded there is a disturbingly low level of knowledge about the diseases.

“The new survey also makes clear that people in NSW are misinformed about how hepatitis B and C can be transmitted. Almost half (45 per cent) of those surveyed wrongly believe hepatitis C can be transmitted via saliva; 67 per cent also believe it is sexually transmitted. Hepatitis B, on the other hand, *is* a sexually transmissible infection, yet only 55 per cent of respondents knew this,” said Stuart Loveday, Executive Officer of Hepatitis NSW.

“A government-funded social marketing campaign is desperately needed to address the confusion if we are to stem the 10,000 new infections occurring annually within Australia, improve current treatment rates, and enhance the health and well-being of people with viral hepatitis,” Loveday said.

The survey also found that more than 50 per cent of people surveyed in NSW and the ACT were unaware that hepatitis B can be effectively managed and treated.

Hepatitis B and C, if left unmanaged and untreated, can lead to severe liver disease and liver cancer. Hepatitis C and B are the top two causes for people requiring liver transplants in Australia, so it is vital that the 212,000 Australians living with chronic hepatitis C, and the 165,000 Australians living with chronic hepatitis B, are aware of the availability of treatment and the importance of managing the diseases.

More than 80 per cent of survey respondents said more public education about hepatitis B and C was needed, which sends a clear message to government.

“If Australia is to avert a looming crisis of hepatitis C-related end-stage liver disease and the associated increase in morbidity, mortality and health-care costs, we can no longer afford to wait,” said Loveday.

MEDIA: Interviews available with Stuart Loveday, Executive Officer of Hepatitis NSW, community health organisations and people living with hepatitis C via Hootville Communication’s Debra Maynard on 02 9665 7182 or 0407 299 007.

Note: For further information about hepatitis see www.hep.org.au or call the national infoline, 1300 HEP ABC (1300 437 222).