Pilot Program to Make Hepatitis C Care Easier

The pilot program focuses on vulnerable patients with limited access to tests and treatment.

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A health care team at Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) is halfway through a year-long pilot project to help patients who have, or are at risk for, hepatitis C virus (HCV) receive testing and treatment without barriers to care.

The project helps patients who are already hospitalized get tested and receive care for liver injury caused by HCV, which can be cured with consistent treatment. OHSU's Hepatitis C Transition-to-Treatment pilot program aims to provide care to vulnerable patients who, for example, struggle with substance use disorder or other challenges.

"A number of patients have become tearful when we're discussing treatment," said Jane Babiarz, MD, an associate professor of medicine in the OHSU School of Medicine and one of the program's organizers, in an OHSU news release. "Patients have said, 'I never thought I was going to get treated for HCV. No one has ever treated me like a person before or acted like this matters.'"

Within the first seven months of the pilot, 19 patients have enrolled and six have already completed treatment. The team plans to test patients post-treatment to confirm that HCV is undetectable in their blood.

OHSU's pilot program aims to test and provide treatment to underserved patients already hospitalized for other health issues.

People with hep C often struggle with substance use disorder, homelessness, unstable housing, limited access to transportation and other issues. These factors can make it difficult to both initiate and complete treatment with direct-acting antivirals, which takes between four and 12 weeks. Untreated hep C can lead to serious issues, including liver cancer, cirrhosis or liver failure later in life.

"This is a real opportunity for ingenuity in medicine," Babiarz said. "We're using a human-focused approach to eradicate hepatitis C, without making vulnerable patients jump through unnecessary, ineffective hoops."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that all adults should be tested for hepatitis C at least once in their lifetime and that people who struggle with substance use disorder be screened more frequently.

Despite this recommendation, a recent OHSU-led study discovered that testing for hepatitis C and other infections among patients with substance use disorder varies and only 80% of observed patients who were not previously diagnosed with HCV were tested for the virus.

The pilot program, which started enrollment in July 2022, hopes to cure 25 patients by June 2023.

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