All Veterans With Hepatitis C, Without Restrictions, to Get Treatment

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The Veterans Affairs Department (VA) will now provide hepatitis C virus (HCV) treatment to all veterans in its health care system, regardless of their liver disease stage, according to VA officials. Under the agency's new policy, people can seek treatment either in a VA facility or through an outside provider through the Veterans Choice program, the Military Times reports.

The move comes after a boost in VA funding from Congress late last year, as well as the introduction of new, less expensive hep C treatments, such as Merck's Zepatier (elbasvir, grazoprevir) which came to market in 2016. Before now, the department said it could only afford to treat the sickest HCV-positive people in its system, citing charges of up to $68,000 per person from competing drugmaker Gilead Sciences for a standard course of treatment.

Since 2014, the VA has treated nearly 42,000 people in its system with Gilead Sciences' Sovaldi (sofosbuvir) and has spent nearly $696 million to do it. The agency expects to spend nearly $1 billion on the drug in fiscal year 2016. As for Zepatier, Merck executives are still in negotiations with the VA over pricing and access to the new drug, but have said that the drug is priced to ensure that it could be accessed by all veterans in either VA program.

Today, an estimated 200,000 veterans are living with HCV, including 174,000 who are enrolled in the VA's health system. About 60 percent of veterans who have hep C served during the Vietnam War era.

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