National Viral Hepatitis Action Plan  
www.cdc.gov/hepatitis

The National Viral Hepatitis Action Plan is our nation’s battle plan for fighting viral hepatitis in the United States. The updated plan outlines strategies to achieve four major goals and includes indicators to help track progress between now and 2020. The goals are:

Goal 1: Prevent new viral hepatitis infections  
Goal 2: Reduce deaths and improve the health of people living with viral hepatitis.  
Goal 3: Reduce viral hepatitis health disparities  
Goal 4: Coordinate, monitor, and report on implementation of viral hepatitis activities

The action plan was developed collaboratively by representatives from 23 federal departments, agencies, and offices with recommendations provided by states, counties, Tribes, cities, and organizations around the country. To view the action plan, go to: https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hhs-actionplan.htm.

Goodbye from the Editor  
By April Crowley

Wow. I can’t believe this is not only the last article, but the hardest one, I will write for this newsletter. I have accepted a position in the Bureau of Environmental Health and will begin this new adventure on April 7, 2017.

This has been one of the most difficult decisions I have ever made. I’ve worked in the Hepatitis Prevention Program for over 14 years and have loved being part of a team that is dedicated to serving others. All of you reading this are part of that team.

I can’t even begin to tell you the respect I have for everyone working in county health departments. You taught me to be a better person and how to help others. To the non-profit hepatitis organizations and the Florida Viral Hepatitis Planning Group, I salute you. I learned compassion and gained strength from you.

To my STD and Viral Hepatitis Section family, I have really enjoyed working here and I am going to miss all of you. Thanks for laughing at my silly jokes. And, remember: the next time it’s raining cats and dogs, make sure you don’t step in a poodle.
Condom Dresses Created as Reminder of National Condom Week
By Jennifer S. Sexton, Public Information Officer, DOH-Charlotte

The Florida Department of Health in Charlotte County (DOH-Charlotte) is spreading awareness about practicing safe sex in a fashionable way. As part of an awareness campaign for National Condom Week, February 14–21, DOH-Charlotte displayed dresses made almost entirely out of condoms at Florida Southwestern State College in Punta Gorda.

The condom dresses are intended to help spark a dialogue about condom use, sexual health, and safer sex that might otherwise be awkward. The dresses were made by Cheryl Adams, HIV Prevention Training Consultant and STD Disease Intervention Specialist for DOH-Charlotte. They were constructed using approximately 400 expired condoms for each dress, and took approximately 30 hours to assemble.

A “price tag” on each dress reveals the true cost of unprotected sex-STDs or unplanned pregnancies, and directs people to the interactive Condom Trail Map for Charlotte County, http://tinyurl.com/h9j8ubp, where free condoms are available to the community.

Veterans Affairs Provides Hepatitis C Treatment
http://www.militarytimes.com

On March 1, 2017, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) began providing hepatitis C treatment to all veterans in its health system who have the virus, regardless of their disease stage.

Having received a boost in funding from Congress late last year, the VA is now able to treat the 174,000 veterans in its health system who have the disease, according to a VA press release.

Dr. David Shulkin, Secretary for Veterans Affairs, said that while the cost previously was too prohibitive to treat all but the sickest patients, the VA can now treat all veterans with the virus who are eligible for VA health care, either in a VA facility or through the Veterans Choice Program.

Syphilis Physician’s Pocket Guides
By Cameron Williams

The STD & Viral Hepatitis Section recently supplied Syphilis Physician’s Pocket Guides to STD Managers throughout Florida to distribute to key area providers. It was created by Yvette Gonzalez, Candy Sims, Ripritz Romain, and Patrick Jenkins with DOH-Broward. The guide is a valuable tool for physicians to accurately and effectively screen, diagnose, and treat patients who may have been exposed to syphilis.

Division of Disease Control and Health Protection
Bureau of Communicable Diseases, STD and Viral Hepatitis Section
Why Didn’t He Tell Me?
By April Crowley, Health Education Coordinator

I have some distant cousins that I didn’t meet until 1982 when I was 28 years old and working in radio. One of them, Joe (not his real name), was a couple of years older than me and just like me, he liked to get down and party. I would always run into him at parties and bars.

I lost contact with Joe over the years, especially once I sobered up. I reconnected with him quite by accident in 2004. Joe was trying very hard to stop drinking, so once again, we had a common link. I saw a lot of him over the next three years. Joe had always been in great physical shape, but all of the sudden, his stomach started distending. He admitted that he had cirrhosis of the liver.

Joe would get a little bit of sobriety under his belt, and then he would relapse. Almost every time he drank, he wound up in the hospital. One time he was admitted for internal bleeding, another time for a seizure. I thought I could save him because I was sober. I was wrong.

In the summer of 2007, the Hepatitis Prevention Program held an educational conference in Orlando. One of the speakers was actor and author Christopher Kennedy Lawford, the son of Patricia Kennedy and the nephew of President John F. Kennedy. Lawford, who has hepatitis C (HCV), spoke at a reception one night and autographed copies of his book, Symptoms of Withdrawal: A Memoir of Snapshots and Redemption. The book chronicles Lawford’s deep and long descent into near-fatal drug and alcohol addiction, and his subsequent path back to the sobriety he has preserved for over 20 years.

The book also talks about the deaths of his father, actor Peter Lawford, and his cousin David Kennedy. In December 1984, Peter Lawford died of a heart attack after being hospitalized for alcohol-related liver and kidney problems. David, who was Christopher’s best friend, died the same year of a drug overdose. Much of Chapter 10 is devoted to his relationship with David and the extended Kennedy family.

The following week, I found out that Joe was in the hospital once again because he drank. This time was different. He didn’t come home. He died on Tuesday, July 3, 2007, at the age of 56. I find it ironic that he died so close to fourth of July, Independence Day. Unfortunately, this was probably Joe’s only way of declaring independence from alcohol.

A few days later at his funeral, a woman who had lived with Joe for several years came up to me in a panic and said that Joe had hepatitis C. She asked lots of questions about transmission and testing. She was especially worried about how long HCV can live out in the environment. (It can live outside the body anywhere from 16 hours to several days.)

I was stunned. Joe knew I worked in the Hepatitis Prevention Program. Why didn’t he tell me he had HCV? If anyone would understand, it would be me. Maybe I could have helped by taking him to the local hepatitis support group. I would have definitely made sure he got vaccinated for hepatitis A and hepatitis B. Sadly, the one thing I could not do was make him stop drinking.

The fact that Joe wouldn’t confide in me just reinforces the fact that there is a huge stigma attached to HCV and people are reluctant to admit their status. That’s why we have to do a better job of creating awareness about this disease and educating the public. Even though this happened almost 10 years ago, the stigma still exists today.

I’m grateful for celebrities like Lawford who are willing to put a face on hepatitis C. Intellectually, I know I could not have prevented my cousin’s death. But, my heart doesn’t always listen to my brain. I just have to remember that Joe is free now. Free from the bondage of alcohol, and free from the shame that he must have felt because he was infected with hepatitis C.
April is STD Awareness Month, an annual observance to raise public awareness about the impact of STDs on the lives of Americans and the importance of preventing, testing for, and treating STDs. It is an opportunity to normalize routine STD testing and conversations about sexual health.

The theme, Syphilis Strikes Back, and the artwork throughout this website was inspired by events during the 1940s and the Work Projects Administration (WPA) posters designed to publicize health issues—including syphilis—in several states and the District of Columbia. This was an era when syphilis’s destruction was at its peak, but it was also a period that ushered in antibiotics and a successful push to halt the disease. Since that time, we’ve also learned a lot of lessons about the importance of understanding things like health equity and reducing stigma among communities and individuals. So while the graphics across the STD Awareness Month website pay homage to the look and feel of the WPA era, they also contain current public health messages seeking to raise awareness, help health care providers protect their patients, and empower individuals to take charge of their health.

For more information regarding STD Awareness Month, visit: https://npin.cdc.gov/stdawareness.

Speaking of Syphilis
By April Crowley

A few months ago, I saw the movie Florence Foster Jenkins. It’s 1944 in New York City and the U.S. is in the midst of World War II. Based on a true story, Meryl Streep plays 76-year-old Florence, an heiress and socialite who dreams of becoming an opera singer. Unfortunately, her singing voice is awful and downright comical. I kept thinking, “Is she tone deaf?” I was not blessed with a good singing voice either and I am very aware of that fact every time I sing.

There’s a scene in the movie where a doctor makes a house call. He looks at her back and asks, “How long have you had syphilis?” Florence replies, “Since my wedding night when I was 18-years-old.” The doctor comments that he has never seen anyone live that long with syphilis. It’s obvious that the disease has caused her various health problems. Remember, this is before antibiotics and the treatment for syphilis at the time was mercury and arsenic. This probably caused progressive deterioration of her central nervous system. Nerve damage may have been compounded by toxic side effects—such as hearing loss. That may explain why her singing voice sounded good to her, but not to others.

As a child, Florence was a talented pianist, and even gave a recital at the White House during the administration of President Rutherford B. Hayes. The nerve damage caused by the syphilis also affected her right hand, so she could no longer play the piano.

Florence Foster Jenkins is a great movie with an incredible cast including Hugh Grant and Simon Helberg. Don’t worry—I haven’t given away the entire plot. Syphilis plays a small part in the story, but it obviously played a huge role in Florence’s life.