

## **POSITION PAPER #04-0209 (February 2009)**

### **Title: *Funding for Hepatitis C Diagnosis, Medical Evaluation and Medical Care***

**Prepared By:** The Florida Viral Hepatitis Council (VHC). The VHC is a partnership between the state of Florida, Department of Health (DOH) and non-governmental community members that provides guidance to the DOH Hepatitis Prevention Program and is responsible for writing a comprehensive hepatitis prevention plan. The group is made up of twenty members from medical, public health, academic, research, clinical and other related areas. The group meets twice a year and includes consumers (individuals who have been diagnosed and treated for viral hepatitis) in its membership.

**Goal:** Increase funding from the state legislature to the DOH Hepatitis Prevention Program for the purpose of evaluating individuals with a positive hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody test as eligible treatment candidates, and providing appropriate treatment.

**Statement of the Problem:** The estimated prevalence of hepatitis C virus (HCV) in Florida is nearly 300,000, or about 1.6% of the general population. HCV is the most common blood-borne infection in the United States. Viral hepatitis, in general, is about fifty to one hundred times more infectious than HIV.

More than 20,000 new cases of chronic hepatitis C were reported in Florida each year during the four last years. Hepatitis C is the most common diagnosis of individuals needing a liver transplant, which can cost between \$300,000 and \$400,000. Liver transplants can best be avoided through early diagnosis and treatment of viral hepatitis.

Studies from several sources, including state universities and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, estimate between 16 and 21% of Floridians have no health insurance.

HCV is usually transmitted from an infected person's blood by: sharing drug injection or tattooing equipment, occupational exposure through a needle stick, a blood transfusion before 1992 (all donated blood was tested starting that year) or by an infected mother to her fetus. HCV may be passed during some types of sexual behavior, but this is rare. This might indicate that up to 57,000 of the approximate 300,000 Floridians who are infected with hepatitis C are uninsured. And, of the average 20,000 chronic hepatitis C cases reported into Florida's Merlin disease reporting system, about 3800 are uninsured.

A substantial gap exists between the ability to test for hepatitis and the ability to provide evaluative testing to determine hepatitis C genotype, viral loads, liver

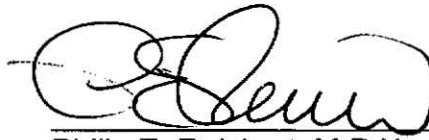
cirrhosis stage and other tests that occur throughout the hepatitis C treatment regimen. These tests cost upward of \$3,000 per patient.

Standard treatment for chronic hepatitis C in individuals who have been evaluated and deemed eligible for treatment is weekly injections of pegalated interferon for forty-eight weeks after a significant drop in HCV viral load is achieved, and daily oral medication of ribavirin for the same time period. This treatment regimen costs an average of \$30,000 per patient.

**Recommendation:** The Viral Hepatitis Council recommends that the Florida legislature provide funding of \$5,000,000 annually to the Department of Health for the following: 1) Hepatitis C evaluative testing for up to 1000 infected individuals who meet uninsured eligibility requirements (COST:  $\$3000 \times 1000 = \$3$  million); and 2) standard treatment for up to 120 uninsured infected individuals (COST:  $\$30,000 \times 120 = \$3,600,000$ )

*Deborah A. Orr*

Deborah A. Orr, Ph.D.  
Community Co-Chair  
Florida Viral Hepatitis Council



Philip E. Reichert, M.P.H.  
Department Co-Chair  
Florida Viral Hepatitis Council

