

Educating ethnic communities about hepatitis C

In Canada, between 3,200 and 5,000 individuals are infected with hepatitis C each year. This liver disease is caused by the hepatitis C virus which has already infected approximately 250,000 individuals in Canada. About one-fifth of those are not aware that they are infected.

Why are these numbers alarming?

Hepatitis C poses a serious threat to population health. Many immigrants come to Canada from countries with a high prevalence of hepatitis C (3% or higher in their country of origin). Individuals who unaware that they are infected can spread the disease. Chronic hepatitis can lead to liver damage, liver cancer, and the need for liver transplants. The care is expensive and it is a drain on the Canadian health care system.

Hepatitis C infection in Canada is largely the result of sharing contaminated drug preparation and injection equipment. Some immigrants may have been exposed to the virus before coming to Canada through inadequately sterilized medical equipment or through some cultural practices. Many ethnic communities consider hepatitis C a “socially unacceptable disease.” The stigma attached to the disease prevents people from learning about it, receiving treatment, and trying to prevent its spread.

With funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada, the Canadian Ethnocultural Council (CEC) has partnered for the last six years with the Canadian Liver Foundation (CLF) to increase awareness of hepatitis C. It has worked with four ethnocultural communities (Chinese, Egyptian, Filipino, and Vietnamese) in Canada to inform them about the disease and help overcome misconceptions and the stigma attached to hepatitis C. Forty focus groups and meetings were held in six cities (Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal). Information gathered from the health care providers and individuals at these meetings helped to develop the following resources about hepatitis C:

- Hepatitis C brochure in Arabic, Chinese, Tagalog, and Vietnamese (translated from existing CLF brochure)
- Hepatitis C reference cards in Arabic, Chinese, French, Tagalog, and Vietnamese
- Training Guide on hepatitis C for health care and social service providers
- Hepatitis C video in English with narration in Arabic, Chinese, Tagalog, and Vietnamese
- Hepatitis C Information Sharing Network.

The study also helped to establish partnerships among communities with various agencies and institutions at the local level so as to increase communication, share resources, and improve health services to the communities. Hopefully more awareness in communities will help overcome the stigma around the disease and motivate those at risk to take positive and preventative action. This work is only a beginning. It is important to build on these actions to prevent the transmission of hepatitis C to family and friends and thereby reduce the burden on the Canadian healthcare system.

For more information, please check the CEC and CLF websites: www.ethnocultural.ca; www.liver.ca or call 1-800-563-5483.