

Media Release

World Hepatitis Day: Tackling a major global health threat

Thursday, 27 July 2017

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians is taking part in World Hepatitis Day (28 July) to raise awareness about hepatitis prevention, testing and treatment.

Viral hepatitis is an infection that causes inflammation of the liver. The most significant types of viral hepatitis are hepatitis B and C. Hepatitis B is usually spread through sexual contact and is also transmitted from mother to baby during pregnancy and around the time of birth. Hepatitis C is usually spread through blood-to-blood contact.

“Hepatitis is a major global public health threat, comparable to other major communicable diseases including HIV and malaria,” RACP President Dr Catherine Yelland explained.

“Many people contract hepatitis C through intravenous drug use or from procedures using unsterilised or contaminated equipment. Migrants from countries with a high prevalence of hepatitis B may have acquired the virus at birth or later in life, if they were not immunised.

“The best way to prevent hepatitis is to never share needles, syringes or other injecting equipment. We encourage people to get immunised for hepatitis B and to always practise safe sex to help avoid transmission of the virus.

“If you’ve been diagnosed with hepatitis, we encourage you to tell partners and household contacts. This means they can be tested and, if not already, get immunised against hepatitis B. General Practitioners will carry out testing and provide advice on treatment options.

“New drug treatments for hepatitis C have made cure possible for over 95 per cent of those infected so we are seeing some tremendous medical advances in this area.”

Dr Yelland said the College supported improved screening programs for vulnerable groups, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

“When it comes to blood-borne virus infections, we understand that access to health care is a major issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and we would like to see more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led solutions to encourage effective treatment and management of hepatitis,” Dr Yelland explained.

“We know that better results and outcomes are achieved for this patient group when care is delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health organisations.”

It has been estimated that around 9 per cent of chronic hepatitis B occurs in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are also acquiring hepatitis B at a rate three times greater than non-Indigenous people. While hepatitis B is a chronic medical condition, anyone diagnosed with the virus can expect to live a full life if their condition is successfully treated and managed.

Australia is a signatory to the World Health Assembly commitment to targets for the global reduction in hepatitis B and C incidence and prevalence. Targets include an 80 per cent reduction in hepatitis C infections, and a 65 per cent reduction in hepatitis-related deaths by 2030.

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About The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP): The RACP trains, educates and advocates on behalf of more than 15,000 physicians and 7,500 trainee physicians across Australia and New Zealand.

The College represents a broad range of medical specialties including general medicine, paediatrics and child health, cardiology, respiratory medicine, neurology, oncology, public health medicine, occupational and environmental medicine, palliative medicine, sexual health medicine, rehabilitation medicine, geriatric medicine and addiction medicine. Beyond the drive for medical excellence, the RACP is committed to developing health and social policies which bring vital improvements to the wellbeing of patients.

The College offers 60 training pathways. These lead to the award of one of seven qualifications that align with 45 specialist titles recognised by the Medical Board of Australia or allow for registration in nine vocational scopes with the Medical Council of New Zealand.