



Hepatitis C

HCCAP

Invited Commentary from the Hepatitis C Caring Ambassadors Program
in response to:

**“Management of patients with hepatitis C in a community population:
diagnosis, discussions, and decisions to treat.”**

Rocca LG, Yawn BP, Wollan P, Kim WR. *Ann Fam Med.* 2004;2:116-124.

The article by Dr. Rocca and colleagues clearly brings to the fore an issue HCV advocates have been trying to communicate for many years: HCV-infected persons are falling through the cracks. Several detrimental downstream consequences resulting from the absence of a nationally coordinated HCV prevention and control program are documented in this article.

- A significant proportion of people infected with HCV are not informed of the option for potentially curative treatment.
- Follow-up counseling after HCV testing is lacking.
- Ongoing monitoring and surveillance systems are absent or inadequate, especially among high-risk populations.
- Relative contraindications to therapy are incompletely addressed resulting in low overall treatment rates.

The long-term consequences of these gaping holes in the current HCV-safety net are potentially devastating to those presently infected and the public at large. Particularly alarming facts presented in this article include:

- Over 8% of the study population were apparently unaware of their HCV status.
- Nearly 10% of those not treated were excluded from therapy for financial reasons.
- Over 40% of those not treated had transient or potentially remediable contraindications.
- Both discussions of treatment and actual treatment significantly favored Caucasians and those with higher education.

It appears the relatively well educated and medically insured in the population receive adequate care in community-based settings, including full-disclosure of their disease status and treatment options. However, the same level of care is far less certain among the uninsured, underinsured, and those with mental health and/or chemical dependency problems. How do we close the gaps?

The *Hepatitis C Epidemic Control and Prevention Act* has been introduced in both houses of Congress. This groundbreaking legislation calls for funding and implementation of activities intended to bring the HCV epidemic under control, and prevent or reduce future HCV-related disease burden. Tasks addressed include:

- education and training: public awareness campaigns, community outreach activities (with a focus on underserved, at-risk populations), curriculum development for health care professionals, and HCV counselor training
- expansion of voluntary testing and risk reduction counseling
- placement and training of hepatitis C coordinators to work with state, local, and tribal health departments
- establishment of a coordinated HCV surveillance and monitoring system

The passage of this legislation will go a long way toward establishing the infrastructure and providing the necessary funding to ensure an equitable safety net for all whose lives are affected by HCV.

Our thanks to Dr. Rocca and colleagues for their contribution to this important topic. For additional information about HCV-related topics addressed in this commentary, please visit our Internet site at www.hepcchallenge.org or the National Hepatitis C Advocacy Council site at www.hepcnetwork.org.