



Media Statement

6 October 2020

2020 NOBEL PRIZE AWARDED FOR DISCOVERY OF HEPATITIS C VIRUS

Today Hepatitis Australia is celebrating the news that the [Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine 2020](#) has been awarded jointly to Harvey J. Alter, Michael Houghton and Charles M. Rice 'for the discovery of Hepatitis C virus'.

"Thanks to this ground-breaking discovery, people can now be tested, diagnosed and cured of hepatitis C. While we don't yet have a vaccine, knowledge of the virus means we can prevent hepatitis C in at-risk communities," said Carrie Fowlie, CEO of the national peak body Hepatitis Australia.

"Hepatitis C has been one of the most overlooked health crises of our time. It has claimed millions of lives and continues to have a massive impact on people, communities and wider health systems," said Cary James, CEO of the World Hepatitis Alliance.

"The discovery of the hepatitis C virus in 1989 was the first step on an important scientific journey that has led to a place where we have the real possibility of eliminating hepatitis within the next decade," said Mr James.

"We congratulate Australian governments for their commitment to eliminate hepatitis C by 2030. Elimination is not aspirational, it is achievable. Elimination means a comprehensive response—improved prevention, diagnosis, treatment uptake, and reductions in mortality and stigma." Said Ms Fowlie

"While good progress has been made to implement Australia's national hepatitis strategies, we risk not meeting our 2022 targets. Australia must focus our efforts carefully to ensure scientific advances are matched by the achievement of national targets."

"Every life lost to hepatitis C is preventable and hepatitis C can be cured."

"Many of the people affected by hepatitis C in Australia got it years ago. The longer people have hepatitis the more likely they will develop liver disease including cancer. We encourage all Australians to ask their GP for a simple hepatitis blood test," said Ms Fowlie.

Hepatitis Australia congratulates the joint Nobel Prize recipients. This deserved recognition brings much-needed awareness to hepatitis C, and we take this opportunity to remind all Australians that we can eliminate viral hepatitis by 2030.

The National Hepatitis Infoline provides free, confidential support. Call 1800 437 222 to talk to someone in your State or Territory.

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**Attachment:
Background information for the media about hepatitis C (6 October 2020)**

About hepatitis C

- Hepatitis C, sometimes called hep C or HCV, is a virus that causes damage to the liver. It can be chronic, which means people could have it their whole life if they don't get cured.
- Hepatitis C is a blood borne virus transmitted when the blood of someone with hepatitis C enters the bloodstream of another person. Left untreated it can cause serious liver disease (e.g. hardening and scarring of the liver, known as 'fibrosis' and 'cirrhosis'), liver failure and liver cancer.
- Prevention strategies include increased awareness, blood safety, harm reduction, blood screening, universal precautions, and early diagnosis and treatment. Highly effective cures for hepatitis C are now available.
- Hepatitis C can be diagnosed by a General Practitioner (GP) with a hepatitis blood test. These tests are not generally included in blood tests conducted for routine health assessments, so should be requested specifically.

Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine 2020

- This year's Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine was awarded for the discovery of the hepatitis C virus.
- The prize was jointly awarded to American researchers Harvey J. Alter and Charles M. Rice and British-born scientist Michael Houghton.
- This discovery was important because it led to blood screening programs, blood tests to accurately diagnose affected individuals, and the development of cures for hepatitis C.
- Prior to the discovery of hepatitis C people presenting to doctors with symptoms were often diagnosed with 'hepatitis Non-A Non-B'. A specific diagnosis now allows people to understand their condition and the management options (including cure) available to them.

Hepatitis C Cure

- New medicines called direct-acting antivirals (DAAs) became available on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) in 2016 to cure hepatitis C. In contrast to previous generation hepatitis C treatments (which were less tolerable and significantly less effective), DAAs are easy to take all-oral medicines with as few as one tablet a day. Most people experience few or no side effects.
- Treatment is now more than 95% effective at curing hepatitis C.¹
- Most people can be treated by their GP.
- Treatment is subsidised through the PBS and low cost for people who have a Medicare Card. This equates to \$41 for each script, or less than \$7 with a concession card.

¹ World Health Organization. 27 July 2020. Hepatitis C. Available from: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/hepatitis-c>

Key Statistics

- In Australia there were 188,951 people living with hepatitis C at the start of 2016.²
- In 2018 an estimated 130,000 people living were with hepatitis C.³
- This major change was due primarily to people living with hepatitis accessing curative treatment (DAAs).
- In 2018 there were an estimated 410 deaths resulting from hepatitis C in Australia, a reduction of 16.3% from the 2016 baseline.⁴

Policy context

- All Australian governments have signed on to the National Hepatitis C Strategy 2018-2022⁵. This document sets a series of targets for Australia to meet in 2022 to stay on course to achieve viral hepatitis elimination by 2030 including:
 - 65% of the 2016 total of 188,951 people living with hepatitis C initiated treatment by 2022
 - Fewer than 171 deaths annually as a result of hepatitis C (a reduction of 65%) by 2022.
- Australia is a signatory to the Global health sector strategy on viral hepatitis 2016-2021, which states as its goal to eliminate viral hepatitis as a major public health threat by 2030. Globally, this means between 6 and 10 million infections are reduced to less than 1 million and 1.4million deaths are reduced to 500,000 by 2030.⁶
- Sustainable Development Goal 3.3 states “by 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases and combat hepatitis, water-borne diseases and other communicable diseases.”⁷

Support and Information

- More information on hepatitis C is available on the website of the national peak body Hepatitis Australia website: www.hepatitisaustralia.com
- People writing about hepatitis C in Australia are encouraged to use the following sentence to direct consumers to support and information:

The National Hepatitis Infoline provides free, confidential support. Call 1800 437 222 to talk to someone in your State or Territory.

² ASHM. 2020. Viral Hepatitis Mapping Project: National Report 2018-19. Available from: <https://ashm.org.au/programs/Viral-Hepatitis-Mapping-Project/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ The Kirby Institute. 2020. National update on HIV, viral hepatitis and sexually transmissible infections in Australia 2009-2018. Available from: <https://kirby.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/kirby/report/National-update-on-HIV-viral-hepatitis-and-STIs-2009-2018.pdf>

⁵ Department of Health. 2018. Fifth National Hepatitis C Strategy 2018-2022. Available from: [https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ohp-bbvs-1/\\$File/Hep-C-Fifth-Nat-Strategy-2018-22.pdf](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ohp-bbvs-1/$File/Hep-C-Fifth-Nat-Strategy-2018-22.pdf)

⁶ World Health Organization. June 2016. Global health sector strategy on viral hepatitis 2016-2021. Available from: <https://www.who.int/hepatitis/strategy2016-2021/ghss-hep/en/>

⁷ World Health Organization. SDG 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages. Available from: <https://www.who.int/sdg/targets/en/>