

# **Report to Albertans on Allocation of Federal and Provincial Funding for Enhanced Health Services for Patients with Hepatitis C Virus**

## **Background**

In the fall of 1998, the federal government agreed to provide provinces with funding to increase the capacity of publicly financed provincial health care programs to ensure Canadians infected with Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) through the national blood supply have reasonable access to health care services for HCV.

## **Alberta Expenditures**

Alberta's share of the federal funding averages \$1.59 million per year for a period of twenty years. Alberta received its first federal payment in June 2001. The funds are being used to enhance the services already provided and funded by the Province of Alberta to meet the health needs of HCV patients. The federal funding covers only a portion of the total cost of HCV health services that Alberta provides to its residents. Services provided to HCV patients cost over \$40M annually and are expected to increase over time.

## **Clinical Consultation in Alberta**

In determining how to enhance services, Alberta Health and Wellness consulted with experts in the field to assess which health services would have optimal benefit for HCV patients.

The medical experts recommended that Alberta allocate the federal funds to enhance the following health services to diagnose and treat HCV:

1. Provide access to new drug treatments that have achieved greatly improved health outcomes over the earlier drug therapies.
2. Provide access to specialized hepatitis nurses and support staff in comprehensive care clinics to assist with administration of these complex therapies.
3. Utilize state of the art laboratory testing and genotyping for Hepatitis C virus.

Alberta accepted these recommendations.

## **Drug Therapy for Chronic HCV**

When the new drug therapies for HCV were approved for use in mid-2002, patients were moved to the new therapies on the advice of specialists and as supply of the drug therapies permitted. The newer drug therapies, which involve a combination of ribavirin and pegylated interferon, cost an average of \$15,000 to \$27,000 per patient for the standard 48-week course of treatment.

## **Comprehensive Care Clinics**

Federal funding is being allocated to comprehensive hepatitis clinics. Within a comprehensive care setting, multi-disciplinary teams take a holistic approach to the management of HCV patients, focusing on eradicating the virus, and more effectively managing the psychosocial issues surrounding the disease and its treatment. A key factor assisting patients achieve optimal health outcomes is the support they receive from clinic staff as they undergo complex drug therapies and deal with difficult side effects that can result.

To most effectively meet patient needs, the comprehensive care clinics provide access to a range of care providers such as hepatologists, infectious disease specialists, and hepatitis nurse clinicians. Through the clinics, patients may be referred for consultative support from dietitians, social workers and a psychiatrist or psychologist.

Patients benefit from the following services:

1. Access to experienced hepatologists, infectious disease specialists and specialized hepatitis nursing staff for diagnosis and treatment planning.
2. In depth counseling from both nurses and physicians regarding the natural history, management, and the public health implications of HCV which can often be misunderstood by the general public.
3. Enhanced access to state-of-the-art treatments for chronic HCV. These can be difficult to tolerate and require prolonged therapy, which necessitates close clinical follow-up, counseling and complementary treatments.
4. Counseling and treatment from an experienced psychologist for pre-existent or treatment-induced psychiatric disorders, drug and alcohol disorders, and social difficulties.
5. Dietetic counseling for liver-related nutritional issues including low salt diets for fluid retention and health eating for fatty liver disease.

6. Access to screening programs for hepato-cellular carcinoma and esophago-gastric varices, complications of chronic viral hepatitis.
7. Access to vaccination against hepatitis A and B, pneumonia and influenza.

### **State-of-the-Art Laboratory HCV Testing and Genotyping**

Alberta is also allocating significant funding to establish state-of-the-art laboratory testing and genotyping for HCV conducted by the Provincial Laboratories of Alberta. This resource assists patients to obtain an accurate diagnosis for HCV and an assessment of their viral genotype. It is estimated that two-thirds of patients referred to an HCV clinic will require drug therapy to treat their disease. Due to the potential side effects of drug therapy, ongoing state-of-the-art laboratory testing is integral to successful drug treatment.

### **Future Funding Allocation**

Future expenditures for HCV health services are planned annually based on a review of health outcomes as reported by the comprehensive care clinics.

### **Contact Information for HCV Patients and Health Providers**

The province is committed to meeting the medical needs of HCV patients. Based on specialist advice, Alberta is addressing this disease in an integrated way to provide the most medically appropriate care for persons at all stages of illness.

Persons with HCV are eligible for health care through their primary health care provider, general practitioner or specialist. These health providers can also connect them to other agencies that provide different types of support. Patients may obtain a referral to an infectious disease specialist or hepatologist who can assess their needs and possible medical eligibility for HCV drug therapy.

Patients can contact the Hepatitis Clinic, Capital Health Region without a physician referral at (780) 407-1650. The wait list is 1 to 7 days for assessment by a hepatitis nurse who can book a specialist appointment.

Comprehensive HCV treatment is also available through the liver clinic at Royal Alexandra Hospital. For an assessment of their medical eligibility, patients require a physician referral from their family doctor.

To be assessed by a specialist who treats HCV in Calgary Health Region, patients need a referral from their family doctor but the wait list for urgent cases is less than 10 days.

Alberta Health Link provides information on symptoms of HCV, the needs for treatment and services they may access. Outside Edmonton and Calgary, patients may call toll-free, 1-866-408-5465 (LINK). In Edmonton, the number is: 408-5465, and in Calgary it is: 1-403-943-5465.

Under the government-sponsored drug programs, individuals can receive coverage for the newer therapies for HCV. These expensive drugs cost approximately \$20,000 per 48-week course of treatment. Information about our government-sponsored plans is available through physician offices, pharmacies, the Alberta Health and Wellness website: [www.health.gov.ab.ca](http://www.health.gov.ab.ca) and the Alberta Blue Cross toll-free information line: 1-800- 661-6995. The hepatitis clinics also advise on other provincial programs that may assist in paying for drug therapy.