

Media Release

Embargoed until May 19

National Hepatitis Awareness Week May 17 – May 23 / World Hepatitis Day May 19

Public awareness of viral hepatitis dangerously low

The results of the latest survey reveal 79 percent of South Australians feel more public education about hepatitis B and C is needed; the need is evident as those surveyed seriously underestimated the severity of viral hepatitis, and have a disturbingly low level of knowledge about the diseases.

The survey, conducted by Hepatitis Australia in March of this year, sends a clear message to government that the complacency about the need for a major public education campaign must end.

While the majority of people surveyed identified the Human Papillomavirus as a cancer causing virus, only 15 percent and 22 percent of respondents respectively, knew that the hepatitis B virus and the hepatitis C virus cause cancer.

“As was made clear, South Australians are misinformed and confused about how these two very different viruses can be transmitted. Fifty percent of people surveyed, wrongly believe hepatitis C can be transmitted via saliva and 71 percent also believe it is sexually transmitted. Hepatitis B on the other hand, *is* a sexually transmissible infection, yet only 52 percent of respondents knew this,” said Kerry Paterson, Executive Officer, Hepatitis C Council of South Australia.

“A government-funded social marketing campaign is desperately needed to address the confusion if we are to stem the 10,000 new infections occurring annually within Australia, improve current treatment rates, and enhance the health and well-being of people with viral hepatitis.”

Only 25 percent of those surveyed were aware that treatment and a cure is possible if a person has hepatitis C, and only 30 percent were aware that hepatitis B can be effectively managed and treated.

Hepatitis B and C, if left unmanaged and untreated, can lead to severe liver disease and liver cancer. Hepatitis C and B are the top two causes for people requiring liver transplants in Australia, so it is vital that the 212,000 Australians living with chronic hepatitis C, and the 165,000 Australians living with chronic hepatitis B, are aware of the availability of treatment and the importance of managing the diseases.

“If Australia is to avert a looming crisis of hepatitis C-related end-stage liver disease and the associated increase in morbidity, mortality and health-care costs of both hepatitis viruses, we can no longer afford to wait,” said Paterson.

Spokespeople available:

- Kerry Paterson, Executive Officer, Hepatitis C Council of South Australia.
- People living with hepatitis C

For further information or to co-ordinate an interview:

Rachel Stanton

Phone: 02 6232 4257 / 0402 463 764 / rachel@hepatitisaustralia.com

Note:

For further information about hepatitis see www.hepccouncilsa.asn.au or call the national infoline, 1300 HEP ABC (1300 437 222).