

VET HEP Update

Hepatitis Education and Advocacy Information For Veterans and Those Who Care About Them

A PUBLICATION OF THE ALF VETERANS HEPATITIS C LIVER DISEASE COUNCIL

Expanded Testing Proposed

The American Liver Foundation (ALF) Veterans Hepatitis C Liver Disease Council has developed a proposal to implement a nationwide three-year screening and testing demonstration project that will rapidly and measurably increase the number of veterans screened and tested for hepatitis C. This proposed large-scale project would provide outreach, education, screening and testing to at least 300,000 veterans who are enrolled in Veterans Health Administration (VHA) services and to non-VHA enrolled veterans.

The testing initiative is designed to coincide with VHA's congressional mandate to increase screening and testing of veterans as identified in a report by the General Accounting Office (GAO). The GAO report indicated that VHA efforts to screen and test veterans within the system are currently inadequate. The

VHA acknowledged that in 1999 and 2000, it missed opportunities to screen as many 3 million veterans who visited VA medical facilities and that as many as 200,000 of these veterans may be positive for the hepatitis C virus. Although the VHA has implemented strategies to improve screening and testing activities, it acknowledged that barriers still exist for veterans who are seeking health care related to hepatitis C.

To address the lack of adequate screening and testing, the ALF Veterans Hepatitis C Liver Disease Council has submitted a proposal to the Department of Veterans Affairs. The ALF Veterans Council has had prior success in partnering with the VHA on hepatitis C education projects. The development of a coordinated screening and testing project with VHA is the next step in our efforts to reduce the threat of hepatitis C among veterans.

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A NOTE FROM THE CHAIR

— John M. Vierling, MD



The American Liver Foundation (ALF) Veterans Hepatitis C Liver Disease Council was established in 1999 as a five-year project to respond to the threat of hepatitis C among veterans.

The Council brings together representation from veteran service organizations, the Veterans Health Administration, the nation's leading medical authorities on hepatitis C and the ALF leadership to identify and implement the most expeditious means to increase the rate of testing and treatment for veterans at risk for hepatitis C.

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) reports that 6.6% of veterans who use VHA services are infected with hepatitis C, this rate is more than three times the national average of 1.8% (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1998). ALF's Veterans Council is working to implement new strategies to increase the number of veterans inside and outside the VHA who receive education, screening and testing for hepatitis C.

In this first quarterly issue we are delighted to share with you information about the important work of the Council, including our efforts to implement a nationwide testing initiative, advocacy efforts to encourage support of key legislation involving veterans and hepatitis C, updates on hepatitis C treatment and the communication of important activities at the Veterans Health Administration.

3 WAYS TO CONTACT THE COUNCIL:

1-888-4HEP-USA, (212)-668-1000, www.liverfoundation.org

Council Members: John Vierling, MD, Sandra Budinsky, Howie DeWolf, James Nocks, MD, Michael Fried, MD, Jacqueline Garrick, Joy Ilem, Marian Kerbleski, Gerond Lake-Bakaar, MD, Robert Roswell, MD, Lawrence Lumeng, MD, William Lyons, Alma Lee, Eugene Schiff, MD, Kenneth Sherman, MD, George Hawley, David Spivey, Robert Maras **Council Advisors:** Julie Currier-Gooden, Lenox Jeffers, MD, Teresa Wright, MD, Lawrence Deyton, MD, MSPH, Laura Miller, Victoria Davey **Alternate Members:** Rick Weidman, William Jefferson, III, Michael O'Rourke, Phil Wilkerson, Jim Fischl, Linda Schwartz, PH.D, Pat Eddington

NEWS

BRIEFS YOU CAN USE

HEPATITIS C BROCHURES DISTRIBUTED

The American Liver Foundation (ALF) Veterans Hepatitis C Liver Disease Council, veteran service organizations and the Veterans Health Administration joined forces to distribute over 1 million hepatitis C brochures to veterans. As part of the Veterans Council's goal to raise awareness of Hepatitis C infection among veterans and to provide up-to-date information and education to veterans, the brochure titled "*The War Against Hepatitis C*" is being distributed to over 1.25 million veterans.



The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) received 1.1 million of the brochures. These brochures have been shipped to VHA medical centers and domiciliary units, clinics, vet centers, regional Veterans Benefit Administration offices and each VISN (Veterans

Integrated Service Network) for distribution to veterans who use its facilities and services. Other brochures were shipped to ALF chapters and to state and county veterans organizations. Additional brochures were printed for veterans service organizations. These brochures included VSO logos and contact information on the backs of the brochures. The brochure includes a health risk assessment for veterans. If veterans answer yes to any of the health risk assessment questions, they are urged to get a simple blood test for hepatitis C. A copy of the health risk assessment is included in this issue of Vet Hep Update. Copies of the brochure can be obtained by contacting the American Liver Foundation tollfree at 1-888-4HEP-USA.

PROMISING NEW TREATMENT AVAILABLE

In August 2001 Schering-Plough Corporation received FDA approval for its combination therapy of Peg-Intron (peginterferon alfa-2b) taken with Rebetol (ribavirin) for the treatment of hepatitis C. This represents an advancement in the standard of care and a new therapeutic option that will be available to physicians and their patients diagnosed with chronic hepatitis C.

This new treatment regimen will offer the convenience of once weekly dosing with pegylated interferon, a longer-acting form of interferon. According to the manufacturer's clinical data, the combination of pegylated interferon with oral ribavirin has shown sustained viral response rates in more than 50% of patients overall. This treatment however, is not suitable for all patients with hepatitis C. Certain genotypes are more responsive to this treatment than others.

Schering's Peg-Intron was the first pegylated interferon to be approved as a monotherapy. Roche's Pegasys (pegylated interferon alfa-2a) is still undergoing evaluation by the FDA and is expected to receive approval in 2002.

Veterans can obtain additional information about the new treatments from their medical providers.

VETERANS DONATE BLOOD

In the nine days following the September 11th terrorist attacks, an estimated 530,000 people rolled up their sleeves and donated blood. This is a tremendous display of American unity in a time of crisis. Veterans were among the thousands of people who donated blood. They may have also have been among the estimated 10,000 donors who will be notified by their blood banks that their blood has been rejected for use due to its infection with hepatitis C and, to a lesser extent, hepatitis B. Although, donors are carefully questioned about whether they have been exposed to hepatitis or other conditions that would exclude them from donating, most people with hepatitis C (and hepatitis B) do not know they have the disease or the risk factors associated with it. Know your risk, take a health risk assessment.

HEALTH RISK Assessment

For Veterans and Those Who
Care About Them

The hepatitis C virus is a blood borne disease that attacks the liver. Many people do not know they are infected, because there are no symptoms in the initial stages of the disease. However, hepatitis C can slowly progress to cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer, and even death. Do you know your risk for hepatitis C infection?



*Know your risk.
Take the test on the
next page.*

Be honest with yourself. If you answer YES to any of the questions, you need to get tested for hepatitis C. Contact your VA medical center, local clinic or private doctor immediately.

For more information about hepatitis C, contact...

- The American Liver Foundation tollfree at 1-888-4HEP-USA; or at www.liverfoundation.org
- The Department of Veterans Affairs Hepatitis C Centers of Excellence at <http://www.va.gov/hepatitisc>
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis>.

Legislation

•**HR 639:** Representative Rodney Frelinghuysen (R-NJ) introduced this bill in February. HR 639 would establish a comprehensive program for testing and treatment of hepatitis C. There are currently 70 co-sponsors on the bill. The Vietnam Veterans of America and other VSO's are working with Senator Olympia Snowe (R-ME) to introduce a companion bill sometime this year in the Senate.

•**SR 457:** This bill was introduced in March by Sen. Snowe, and would establish service-connection for veterans with hepatitis C. For veteran benefit purposes, it assumes that any Vietnam era veteran with hepatitis C, and who meet prescribed conditions, has hepatitis C as a service connected disability. Work is currently underway to find a companion sponsor in the House.

•**VA Budget:** The House and Senate passed their versions of the fiscal year 2002 VA-HUD appropriations bills. The Senate included \$21.38 billion for the Veterans Health Administration Medical Care Account, an increase of \$1.14 billion over FY 2001. Both the House and the Senate included strong report language regarding hepatitis C testing.

VA

•**HCV Field Office:** The Department of Veterans Affairs established an HCV and HIV Field Office in West Haven, CT. Dr. Michael Rigsby will direct the new office. The Office will provide front-line perspective to the Public Health Strategic Health Care Group led by Dr. Lawrence Deyton in Washington, DC. Dr. Deyton said, "It keeps us in touch with day-to-day needs of front-line providers and permits us to take advantage of the diversity and breadth of experience across the system".

•**VA Study:** A national VA Cooperative Study (*Prevalence of Hepatitis C Infection in Veterans*) has been funded to determine the prevalence of hepatitis C virus infection in veterans. The study will involve 20 VA sites selected at random from around the country and a random sample size of 4,000 veterans. Participants in the study will receive \$20 compensation upon completion of a questionnaire and blood test.

•**Roswell Nominated:** President Bush announced his intention to nominate Dr. Robert H. Roswell to be Under Secretary for Health. The position has responsibility for all of the healthcare programs of the VA. "Dr. Roswell has distinguished himself as a leader in serving veterans, making him an ideal person to lead VA in its medical mission," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi. Dr. Roswell is a member of the Veterans Council.

Risk Assessment Test

Do you know your risk for hepatitis C infection? Know your risk. Take this test. Be honest with yourself. If you answer **YES** to any of the questions, you need to get tested for hepatitis C.

- | | YES | NO | | YES | NO |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. In your military service, have you ever been in a situation in which you have had exposure to someone else's blood through contact with a bleeding wound, through needle-stick injury, or in any other way? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 7. Have you ever had unprotected sex with multiple partners? Do you have a history of sexually transmitted disease? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Did you serve in Vietnam? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 8. Have you ever had a tattoo or part of your body pierced? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Did you have a blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 9. Have you ever had hemodialysis? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Have you ever, EVEN ONCE, injected drugs? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 10. Were you born to an hepatitis C infected mother? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Have you ever, EVEN ONCE, snorted or inhaled cocaine using a straw or bill? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 11. Have you received, before 1987, blood products for clotting problems? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Have you ever had acupuncture? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 12. Have you ever had an abnormal liver function test? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Expanded Testing Proposed

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Key Project Components

An outreach, education and media campaign has been designed to reach VHA enrolled and non-enrolled veterans. Under this proposal, non-VHA enrolled veterans may be offered an opportunity to enroll in VHA services as part of this initiative.

Veterans and their families will be reached through newspapers, television and cable TV advertisements. The American Liver Foundation has a network of 27 chapters and affiliates nationwide. Each of these ALF chapters will implement marketing campaigns designed to reach veterans in their targeted areas. The outreach and education campaign also relies heavily on veteran service organizations (VSO's) to get the information about the screening and testing project out to their members. The VSO's involved in this project include: American Legion, American Veterans, Disabled American Veterans, National Veterans Affairs Council (American Federation of Government Employees), Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Vietnam Veterans of America.

Through our advertised messages and outreach efforts, veterans will be asked to call a toll-free number to access the telephonic Health Risk Assessment (HRA). Upon the completion of the HRA, veterans will be advised of the opportunity to receive hepatitis C testing at a VHA facility, walk into a Vet Center to receive a self administered home test kit, or obtain a test kit in the mail. The Home Access

Hepatitis C Check™ test and service will be



The veterans will receive pre-test and post-test counseling and test results by telephone; they will receive information and education material about hepatitis C and, as necessary, they will receive referrals to VA facilities for follow-up evaluation and treatment.

Projected Outcome

The proposed three-year screening and testing campaign is expected to serve 300,000 veterans who are VHA and non-VHA service enrolled. The VHA is carefully considering a partnership with ALF and is in the process of identifying issues that might impact the screening and testing veterans through this proposed demonstration project. We are confident that the VHA will identify any issues that might hamper the development of a formal partnership agreement with ALF. ALF is poised to initiate the screening and testing demonstration project in a timely manner. With VHA approval, we hope to implement the project in early 2002.

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

The Veterans Council welcomes input from veterans and from those who care about them.

Comments & Suggestions

Articles, information, comments and suggestions for Vet Hep Update are encouraged. Contact us.

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The American Liver Foundation
has a network
of chapters and affiliates
nationwide.

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