



Thousands of patients in England to get new hepatitis C drugs

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NHS England has announced that 3500 patients with liver cirrhosis from chronic infection with hepatitis C will have access to new drugs every year after new annual investment of £190m (€260m; \$290m) to manage the disease.¹

Currently only about 3% of patients with hepatitis C in the United Kingdom achieve a cure from hepatitis C infection because of low treatment rates and the low effectiveness of the previously available drugs.

But the crop of new drugs has brought in a new optimism in curing the disease. Last year experts predicted that hepatitis C could be virtually eliminated by 2030, because the effectiveness of the new drugs was found to be as high as 96%.²

Public Health England's modelling has shown that that if 2000 patients with cirrhosis were treated with new drugs each year the annual incidence of end stage liver disease and hepatocellular cancer related to hepatitis C could be cut significantly in the next five years, from a predicted 1900 cases a year in 2015 to 580 cases by 2020.

The new drugs include sofosbuvir, ledipasvir, ombitasvir, paritaprevir, ritonavir, daclatasvir, and simeprevir.

Treatment with sofosbuvir and simeprevir has been shown to produce a sustained virological response in 90% and 80% of patients, when combined with pegylated interferon and ribavirin for 12 or 24–48 weeks, respectively. But although their effectiveness has excited clinicians, their cost has challenged governments at a time of funding pressure. In the United States \$11.3bn was spent on paying for four of the new hepatitis C drugs in 2014, contributing to a quarter of the increase in the cost of prescription drugs that year.³

About 160 000 people in England have chronic hepatitis C infection, although half do not know that they are infected. Treating them all with a £54 000 12 week course of the new drugs would cost £8.6bn.

Richard Jeavons, NHS England's director of specialised services, said, "At a time when funding is inevitably constrained across the NHS, this is a huge new investment. In fact, it'll be the NHS's single largest new treatment expansion this year. That's why we're also running a competitive tendering process in parallel, to seek to bring down the price of these very expensive new drugs."

Peter Moss, a consultant and chair of NHS England's infectious diseases clinical reference group, said, "The new antiviral drugs being made available through this scheme offer a huge improvement in care for patients with hepatitis C related liver cirrhosis. Now we are in a position to cure the large majority of patients and so to prevent further liver damage and premature death."

- 1 NHS England Clinical Reference Group for Infectious Diseases. Clinical commissioning policy statement: treatment of chronic hepatitis C in patients with cirrhosis. Jun 2015. www.england.nhs.uk/commissioning/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2015/06/hep-c-cirrhosis-policy-statement-0615.pdf.
- 2 Watts G. Hepatitis C could be virtually eliminated by 2030, experts believe. *BMJ* 2014;348:g2700.
- 3 McCarthy M. New drug for hepatitis C contributes to 13% rise in spending on prescription drugs in US. *BMJ* 2015;350:h2055.

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