

Putting an end to Viral Hepatitis: America's silent killer

Written by Mike Honda

Thursday, 03 November 2011 11:00

This week, I introduced a bi-partisan and bi-cameral version of my Viral Hepatitis prevention bill with Rep. Bill Cassidy of Louisiana and Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts. The following OpEd ran in several papers to coincide with the introduction of this legislation:

There's a silent killer loose in America. It is viral hepatitis, and it contributes to the death of 15,000 Americans every year. Most people don't even know they have it until years later when it's too late for any treatment to work.

That is why we're fighting back with new legislation being introducing today: the Viral Hepatitis Testing Act of 2011, the start of what we expect to be a historic national effort to fight – and ultimately eradicate – Hepatitis B (HBV) and C (HCV) in America. The current approach is not working. Typically, despite the pervasive nature Hepatitis B and C, health providers do not screen Americans at high-risk for hepatitis. Moreover, most people don't recognize symptoms until later stages when they have developed cancer or liver disease.

It is not surprising, then, that viral hepatitis is more common than HIV/AIDs but remains unrecognized as a serious threat to public health. In addition, viral hepatitis disproportionately impacts racial and ethnic populations. For example, HCV is twice as prevalent among African Americans as among Caucasians. Asian Americans comprise more than half of the known hepatitis B population in the United States and consequently maintain the highest rate of liver cancer among all ethnic groups.

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There is no federal funding for core public health services for viral hepatitis. Nor is there any federal funding to educate the public about the risks of chronic hepatitis B and C or get people proper treatment once they're infected.

Consequently, Assistant Secretary of Health Dr. Howard Koh and a team of experts sprang into action last May, developing a comprehensive plan to unmask this silent killer. The legislation we are introducing today builds on that plan.

Our bill will fill the gaping hole in our public health system when it comes to viral hepatitis. It will help to avoid needless tragedies by setting up prevention and testing programs and educating Americans on the pervasive nature of hepatitis B and hepatitis C will help avoid needless tragedies.

The Viral Hepatitis Testing Act of 2011 will establish four measurable goals that will help us keep track of progress in our war on this silent killer.

First, it requires testing programs around the nation to increase the number of individuals who are aware of their infection. Around 75 percent of people carrying viral hepatitis today don't even know they are infected, so improved testing can flip that disturbing statistic on its head in just five years, with an estimated 75 percent of infected people aware of their status by 2016.

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This will allow people and their doctors to treat this disease before it develops into something worse. This program will also focus these efforts on minority communities that are at higher risk of infection.

Second, our legislation will require the development and distribution of public information about viral hepatitis detection and control of infections. Education is an important step in making hepatitis a detectable and manageable disease.

Third, it will call for better coordination of medical treatment and counseling so that infected people have access to the best services.

Lastly, the bill will improve the education, training, and skills of health professionals in the detection and control of viral hepatitis infections, giving providers the skills they need to tackle this public health threat.

Passing the Viral Hepatitis Testing Act of 2011 will save lives and improve health care. It will also save family's and taxpayer's money. The costs of education, research, and treatment pale in comparison to the health costs that will be incurred if we do nothing.

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Without effective prevention and vaccination methods, chronic hepatitis B and C are expected to drain our country of billions of dollars in the coming years. The aging baby-boomer population is estimated to account for two out of every three cases of chronic hepatitis C. In the next decade, the costs of hepatitis C to commercial insurance and Medicare will more than double. Within 20 years, Medicare costs will increase fivefold and medical costs for patients with hepatitis C infection will skyrocket from \$30 billion to more than \$85 billion.

Without action, thousands more Americans will die each year from this disease, a tragedy that is preventable. We know what we need to do and we have the tools to get it done. We can lower costs, improve care, save lives and retire this silent killer once and for all.