The NSW Health Hepatitis C Public Awareness Campaign is a new campaign targeting Hepatitis C (HCV) conducted by the NSW Department of Health in partnership with a range of government and non-government organisations. This article describes the campaign, including its background and development.

The campaign, which will run during March and April 2000, will target the complex issues of increasing awareness of HCV, and will include a statewide television advertising campaign aimed at reducing misinformation and creating an environment supportive of HCV prevention programs using social marketing techniques. It is hoped that the campaign will also encourage people concerned about HCV to seek advice and, where appropriate, testing from their local General Practitioner.

BACKGROUND

It is estimated that there are approximately 200,000 people in Australia infected with HCV. The rate of new infections is estimated to be 11,000 people annually,\(^1\) with NSW accounting for over 40 per cent of all HCV cases, in terms of both prevalence and incidence.\(^2\)

Prevention of HCV infection to date has concentrated on the development of health education programs targeting high-risk populations, and measures such as needle and syringe programs. No previous HCV information and education campaign in the mass media has targeted the general community in Australia. There are, however, a number of reasons why a mass media campaign would be an effective prevention and education measure. These

reasons were highlighted by the NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues Inquiry into Hepatitis C (1998), and the recent Commonwealth Government review of Australia’s response to HCV (1999), and include:

- the continuing high incidence rate for HCV possibly suggests that education and prevention programs may not have been sufficiently effective. A campaign targeting the general NSW community could substantially enhance the effectiveness of existing education and prevention programs;
- HCV may pose a greater risk to the general community than is currently realised because of poor infection control practices in skin-penetration businesses in non-health care settings;
- many people potentially infected with HCV may be unaware that they are chronically infected with the disease, that they are potentially infectious to other people and that they may benefit from the recent advance in new combination treatments for hepatitis. A general community awareness and education campaign could provide tangible health benefits to these people.
- there is a need to reduce both community concerns about HCV and the potential discrimination faced by people living with HCV.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE CAMPAIGN

In March 1999 the NSW Department of Health established a campaign steering group, comprising representatives from: NSW Health Hepatitis Advisory Committee, NSW Department of Health, Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, relevant non-government organisations, researchers, and general practitioners. This group has overseen the development and implementation of the campaign.

A consultation process involving a broad range of key stakeholders for the campaign was conducted in April and May 1999. The process included focus groups with people with HCV in both rural and urban NSW as well as telephone interviews with a range of key informants including: general practitioners, researchers, experts on injecting drug use issues, community based organisations, and people living with HCV. The information collected was used to develop an overall communication strategy and key messages for the campaign. These messages are summarised below:

To the general community

That HCV is a widespread infectious disease that can cause serious health problems. There is major risk of infection through sharing injecting equipment, and through tattooing and body piercing with unsterile equipment. Transmission, symptoms, effects and the treatments for HCV are different to those of Hepatitis A and B. Information and support is available.

To people with hepatitis C

That information, treatment and support is available.

To people with hepatitis C who are from a non-English speaking background:

That HCV is a widespread infectious disease that can cause serious health problems. There is a major risk of infection through sharing injecting equipment, through tattooing and body piercing with unsterile equipment, and through medical procedures carried out with unsterile equipment in some overseas countries. Information and support are available.

To Health Professionals

That your attitude towards people with HCV can make a difference.

The NSW Department of Health appointed an advertising agency in January 2000 to develop the campaign products. The agency has developed a broad range of campaign materials to be launched in late March 2000.

EDUCATION COMPONENTS

The NSW Health Hepatitis C Public Awareness Campaign will employ a range of educational components. These will include:

- statewide television advertising, broadly based on the key messages of the campaign which will run from late March 2000 until the end of April 2000;
- print resources, including posters and pamphlets available from Area Health Services and other relevant health organisations;
- a telephone contact helpline, which will be available throughout the period of the campaign providing information and referrals relating to HCV;
- local Area Health Service activities will include, local campaign launches, information for general practitioners, needle and syringe programs;
- information mailout to General Practitioners.

The NSW Department of Health has also been working with a range of relevant government and non-government organisations including: the Hepatitis C Council of NSW, the NSW Users and AIDS Association, CEIDA, and the Multi-Cultural HIV/AIDS Project in developing a range of additional support services to deal with the effects of the campaign. These include materials targeting specific ethnic groups.
DEAR EDITOR

The *NSW Public Health Bulletin* has helped to bring together a group of researchers to investigate the links between cardiovascular disease and periodontal disease. Staff at the Royal North Shore Hospital and the United Dental Hospital are joining forces in the Pericar Study to study the effect of periodontal treatment on haemostatic risk factors for cardiovascular disease in patients with advanced periodontal disease.

The Pericar Study was developed as a direct result of the recent publication of the four-part oral health series in the Bulletin during 1999. The papers in the series successfully promoted a greater awareness of oral health issues in the wider health community and facilitated interaction and discussion between health professionals.

We thank the Bulletin for providing the forum that resulted in this exciting research opportunity with its implications for health care.

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**REFERENCES**


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**LETTER TO THE EDITOR**

Further information about the *NSW Health Hepatitis C Public Awareness Campaign* can be obtained from Brent Mackie, AIDS/Infectious Diseases Branch, NSW Department of Health, Locked Bag 961, North Sydney NSW 2059. Telephone: (02) 9391 9247. Email: bmack@doh.health.nsw.gov.au.

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**ERRATUM**

In the January–February issue of the *NSW Public Health Bulletin* (Volume 11, Numbers 1–2, page 13) the contact list for Women’s Health Coordinators in the Area Health Services had an incorrect table heading. The heading ‘Injury Program Manager’ should have read ‘Women’s Health Coordinator’. The editor apologises for this error.