MEDIA RELEASE

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Australia a potential world leader to eliminate hepatitis C

Burnet Institute has joined international hepatitis C experts in welcoming the World Health Organization’s (WHO) announcement of ambitious global targets and a goal to eliminate hepatitis as a public health threat by 2030.

Australia is among the 194 countries who have adopted the WHO’s first-ever Global Health Sector Strategy for Viral Hepatitis (GHSS) that includes a set of prevention and treatment targets. If these are reached, more than seven million lives could be saved by 2030. For the first time the elimination of viral hepatitis could become a reality.

The WHO global targets proposed for hepatitis C virus (HCV) are:

- 80 per cent reduction in HCV incidence by 2030 (50 per cent reduction by 2020) compared with 2010;
- 65 per cent reduction in HCV-related deaths by 2030 compared with 2010.

Chair of the WHO Advisory Committee on Viral Hepatitis Testing and Head of Burnet’s Centre for Population Health, Professor Margaret Hellard said Australia could become a world-leader in achieving the elimination of hepatitis C.

“Models by our Burnet researchers show it is possible for Australia to reach these WHO targets ahead of time, possibly within a decade, by 2026. But this will take a strategic multipronged approach to hepatitis C elimination in this country,” Professor Hellard said.

“Australia is in a unique and privileged position to lead the world on hepatitis C elimination – we can stop the deaths and we can stop transmission.”

Burnet Institute recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with The Kirby Institute to work together to eliminate hepatitis C in Australia within a decade.

An estimated 230,000 Australians are living with chronic hepatitis resulting in up to 630 deaths from liver cancer and liver failure each year. More than 6,000-10,000 new infections occur each year in Australia, mainly through injecting drug use. Less than two per cent of Australians with HCV access treatment and most people are not aware of their hepatitis C status.

Professor Hellard said to achieve elimination of hepatitis C it was vital to increase awareness and also expand access to testing and treatment using the new PBS-listed direct acting antiviral (DAAs) drugs.

“Currently around 20 per cent of people infected with hepatitis C have never been tested. That is why it is dubbed the silent killer,” Professor Hellard said.
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“The DAAs are now affordable but the challenge is to roll them out and increase access.

“Burnet researchers and collaborators internationally have also shown through modelling that if we treat people who inject drugs (PWID) we can impact on transmission – namely ‘treatment and prevention’ – but this needs to be combined with ongoing high quality harm reduction.

“Treating a small percentage of PWID in Australia annually over the next 10 years, just over 4000 people each year, will substantially reduce hepatitis C incidence and prevalence.”

Internationally, the quest for an affordable, effective vaccine against hepatitis C is urgently needed to achieve elimination in many countries. Burnet’s Associate Professor Heidi Drummer and her team in the Viral Entry and Vaccines Laboratory are showing promising results in their HCV vaccine candidate, known as HepSeeVax.

To arrange media interviews with Professor Hellard please contact:

Tracy Parish
Deputy Head, Public Affairs and Communications
Burnet Institute
Ph: +61 403 755082 or tracy.parish@burnet.edu.au