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THE BRITISH SOCIETY OF GASTROENTEROLOGY**

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**HEPATITIS C EPIDEMIC VASTLY UNDERESTIMATED BY  
GOVERNMENT**

There are more than double the number of people infected with the hepatitis C virus (HCV) in England and Wales than the government has estimated, delegates at the British Society of Gastroenterology's Annual Scientific Meeting were warned.

The government's Health Protection Agency puts the figure at around 200,000. But William Rosenberg, Professor of Hepatology at the University of Southampton, warned: "We have estimated the real number is around 466,000 although it could be as high as a million."

Assuming the figure is around half million then 125,000 people will go on to develop serious liver disease which, by 2008, could be costing the NHS £123 million in liver transplants, he said.

Antiviral treatment for hepatitis C is much more successful now than it was a decade ago and patients have at least a 50:50 chance of clearing the infection. But Professor Rosenberg warned that the real worry with hepatitis C in the UK is that 86% of people with the virus are unaware they are infected.

Together with a traditional reluctance to treat the infection, this means that, at best, only one in 50 people with the virus are being treated.

"Unless urgent action is taken, about 116,000 people will die early from cirrhosis caused by hepatitis C that could have been treated," he said.

Professor Rosenberg criticised the government's strategy on tackling HCV, launched two years ago, as being underfunded and outdated.

"In 2002 the Department of Health stated that an action plan on HCV was needed urgently," he said.

"It took two years to get a campaign from the government which is funded to the tune of £2million over two years- compared to the £40million pledged every year for ten years, to persuade us to switch to digital TV."

That campaign focuses on how people get the disease rather than persuading them they need to come forward for diagnosis and treatment no matter how they got the disease," he added.

"The current campaign is pejorative and basically says 'face your guilty past' when what we should be saying is 'it doesn't matter how you got infected, you need to get treated.'"

He compared the UK position with that in France which has a similar-sized population to the UK and has a similar prevalence of the disease.

"The French diagnose five times as many patients as we do and they treat 12 times as many," said Professor Rosenberg. "Whereas we manage to treat about 10% of those we diagnose and we don't diagnose many."

In France the rising tide of hepatitis C infection has been successfully reversed through anonymous HCV testing clinics and a huge public awareness campaign that has sought to destigmatise the disease, linked to effective treatment centres.

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**Notes for editors:**

- Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver.
- Viral infections are one of the three commonest causes of hepatitis. Hepatitis C infection (also known as Hep C or HCV) is one virus that can cause long-lasting infection and can lead to liver disease.

- Injecting drug use is the dominant driver in the growth of hepatitis C in England, accounting for more than 80% of diagnosed infections.
- Prevalence of hepatitis C among injecting drug users (IDUs) is high at around 40%-70% and since 2000 prevalence in recent injectors has doubled to 20%
- Most people who are infected show no symptoms until a late stage when they develop liver failure from cirrhosis
- Hepatitis C is spread when blood from an infected individual comes into contact with others.
- Once diagnosed, individuals can reduce their risk of developing serious liver disease by avoiding excessive alcohol consumption, and receiving treatment if appropriate
- The treatment of choice for individuals with chronic hepatitis C infection is a combination of two drugs: interferon and ribavirin.
- This combination therapy is successful in clearing virus from the blood of just over 50% of those treated
- But the success of treatment relies on people coming forward for testing.
- New more effective treatments are likely to become available in the near future.