

U.S.

Hepatitis C Deaths in U.S. Rose in 2014, but New Drugs Hold Promise

By ABBY GOODNOUGH MAY 4, 2016

WASHINGTON — Deaths from hepatitis C in the United States continued climbing in 2014, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported on Wednesday, but experts hope the trend will reverse over the next few years as more people with the virus receive highly effective new treatments.

The agency also found that more Americans died from complications of hepatitis C in 2013 than from 60 other infectious conditions combined, including H.I.V., tuberculosis and pneumococcal disease. But while there has been an explosion in new hepatitis C cases among young opioid addicts who inject heroin and other drugs with shared needles, the rising deaths are largely among baby boomers who contracted the virus decades ago and have deteriorated over time.

“They’ve progressively become ill with liver damage and other conditions” caused by the virus, said Dr. John Ward, the director of the C.D.C.’s Division of Viral Hepatitis. “They’re now succumbing before they receive the care and treatment that could avert those diseases.”

The agency counted 19,659 deaths caused by hepatitis C in 2014, a record.

Many older people with hepatitis C acquired it from blood transfusions that they received before 1992, when donated blood was not screened for the virus. Left untreated, it inflames and can eventually scar the liver, making it less effective at filtering toxins. Over decades, it can lead to liver failure and liver cancer, and it is the most common reason for liver transplants.

“We’ve been expecting a tsunami of liver cancer and cirrhosis that would crest right around now,” said Dr. Ira Jacobson, a hepatitis specialist who is the chairman of the Department of Medicine at Mount Sinai Beth Israel. “What I’m optimistic about is that we’re going to make a major dent in the mortality much sooner than

we would have without these medications.”

Dr. Jacobson noted that the latest death statistics were from 2014, the first year that the new breakthrough drugs for hepatitis C patients became widely available, and that the number of people being cured has multiplied since then.

Since 2012, the C.D.C. has recommended that all people born between 1945 and 1965 be tested for hepatitis C, but Dr. Ward said many still have not. Even those who discover they have the virus may not seek proper care, and those who do may not gain access to new drugs that cure most patients in 12 weeks with few side effects. One such drug, Sovaldi, has a list price of \$1,000 per daily pill, or \$84,000 for a 12-week treatment; another, Harvoni, costs \$94,500 for 12 weeks.

The prices have strained the budgets of state Medicaid programs and prison systems, leading many to restrict treatment to the most seriously ill patients. But with other new hepatitis C drugs entering the market, Gilead Sciences, the maker of Harvoni and Sovaldi, has begun offering bigger discounts to insurers.

Lawsuits brought by states have also helped. Last week, under a settlement reached with Attorney General Eric T. Schneiderman, seven health insurers in New York agreed to eliminate restrictions on who could receive the drugs.

Dr. Ward said the agency’s goal was a decline of at least 15 percent in deaths associated with hepatitis C over the next five years. But public health officials face another huge challenge in slowing the rapid rise of hepatitis C infection among young people swallowed by the opioid epidemic. Acute cases of hepatitis C have more than doubled since 2010, according to the agency, with the new cases mostly among young, white drug injectors in rural and suburban areas. Dr. Ward said the agency believed as many as 30,000 people were acquiring hepatitis C each year.

One big remaining barrier, he said, is the reluctance of insurers to treat people who have not stopped injecting opioids and will continue to use them.

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