

Hepatitis B Foundation Leaders Help Shape National Plan to Eliminate Hepatitis B and C

Drs. Robert Gish and Chari Cohen provide expert testimony to the National Academy of Medicine in support of a national strategy to eliminate chronic viral hepatitis in the United States by 2030



DOYLESTOWN, Pa. (December 2015) – Hepatitis B Foundation leaders recently traveled to Washington, DC, and shared insight into their experience with programs to detect and treat hepatitis B infection as part of the National Academy of Medicine’s (formerly known as the Institute of Medicine) initiative to draft a national strategy to eliminate hepatitis B and C in the United States by 2030.

Dr. Robert Gish, medical director of the Hepatitis B Foundation, discussed the healthcare system’s innate obstacles to the elimination of hepatitis B. Dr. Chari Cohen, director of public health for the Hepatitis B Foundation, spoke about the successes and challenges facing community-based screening and education programs for hepatitis B, such as those being conducted in Philadelphia by the foundation and programs sponsored by many other organizations nationwide.

“We believe about two million people in the United States are infected with the hepatitis B virus today, but many more likely suffer undetected,” said Dr. Gish, a liver specialist from Stanford University who has devoted his career to studying and treating viral hepatitis. “The barriers to widespread screening make it difficult to estimate the true prevalence of the disease and, therefore, to estimate the public health and economic toll it takes on our nation.”

The Division of Viral Hepatitis within the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention commissioned the National Academy of Medicine to convene an expert committee to examine scientific and policy issues related to the prevention, detection, control, and management of hepatitis B and C infection. The committee’s charge is to determine whether elimination goals for viral hepatitis infection in the United States are feasible and to identify possible critical success factors. The findings of this initial phase of work are expected to be released to the public in the first half of 2016.

Both Gish and Cohen drew the committee’s attention to the numerous economic, social, and cultural barriers to widespread hepatitis B screening. Those challenges range from language barriers between healthcare providers and the communities they serve to workplace policies that discriminate against patients with known hepatitis B diagnoses.

“Community-based programs can make significant strides toward our goal of increasing hepatitis B screening and education, particularly among high-risk, underserved, hard-to-reach communities,” said Dr. Cohen. “To be sustainable, these programs need long-term commitments for the funding and resources they need to be successful. And they can’t go it alone. They need to be able to work in partnership with medical homes, clinics and other primary care settings.”

Hepatitis B is the world’s most common serious liver infection and can lead to premature death from cirrhosis, liver failure, and liver cancer. Hepatitis B is spread through blood, unprotected sex, non-sterile needles, and from an infected woman to her newborn during delivery. Although there is a vaccine to prevent infection and drugs to control the disease, there is still no cure for hepatitis B. Worldwide, as many as 1 million people die each year from hepatitis B and its complications.

“I can think of no better ambassadors to send to Washington to advocate on behalf of hepatitis B patients than Drs. Robert Gish and Chari Cohen,” said Dr. Timothy Block, president of the Hepatitis B Foundation and the Baruch S. Blumberg Institute. “Advances in research and improvements to public health screening and education will help us all work together to relegate hepatitis B to the history books.”

About the Hepatitis B Foundation: The Hepatitis B Foundation was founded in 1991 and is the only national nonprofit organization solely dedicated to finding a cure for hepatitis B and improving the quality of life for those affected worldwide through research, education and patient advocacy. To learn more, visit www.hepb.org.

About the Baruch S. Blumberg Institute: The Baruch S. Blumberg Institute is an independent, nonprofit research institute established in 2003 by the Hepatitis B Foundation to fulfill its research mission and to conduct discovery research and nurture translational biotechnology in an environment conducive to interaction, collaboration and focus. The research center was renamed in 2013 to honor Baruch S. Blumberg, who co-founded the Foundation and won the Nobel Prize for his discovery of the hepatitis B virus. To learn more, visit www.blumberginstitute.org.

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