Medicaid Coverage of Hep C Testing Applauded by the American Academy of Nursing

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid will now cover screening tests for hepatitis C virus, which 2.7 to 2.9 million Americans may have. This decision will save many lives. The American Academy of Nursing supports this coverage.

WASHINGTON, DC (June 10, 2014)—Last week, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) announced that Medicare beneficiaries might be covered for hepatitis C virus (HCV) testing.

“Hepatitis C virus is the most common blood-borne infection in the US and is quickly becoming a major public health problem,” says Donald Bailey, PhD, RN, FAAN; an associate professor at Duke University School of Nursing.

Approximately 75 to 85% of people infected with HCV develop chronic infections. Chronic hepatitis C virus infection can last a lifetime and lead to serious liver problems, including scarring of the liver and hepatocellular carcinoma, the most common liver cancer. In the next 10 years, about 150,000 people will die from liver cancer and end-stage liver disease associated with chronic hepatitis B and C. Liver disease is now the leading cause of death in Americans with HIV infection, a group already highly susceptible to HCV.

The American Academy of Nursing and its Expert Panel on Emerging & Infectious Diseases has long called for increased testing for HCV. The Academy is pleased that Medicare will now cover testing for many high risk groups.

Who is eligible? Medicare patients who are considered “high risk” are eligible. Based on research, Medicare has said people who are at a high risk of carrying the virus are persons:

1. with a current or past history of illicit injection drug use
2. received a blood transfusion prior to 1992
3. are born from 1945 through 1965, who are five times more likely to carry the virus.

**What should Medicare patients do?** If you are at a high risk, ask your primary care provider to conduct a simple blood test to check for the virus.

“The healthcare community and consumer advocacy groups need to increase efforts to educate the public about this disease,” says Donna Zucker, PhD, RN, FAAN, associate professor at University of Massachusetts Amherst. “With earlier testing and diagnosis, the easier it is to treat this disease.”

This coverage change will assist in efforts to educate the public, curtail the spread of the virus, and more effectively treat the disease.

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American Academy of Nursing fellows are available for further comment.

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