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The National Viral Hepatitis Roundtable Welcomes CDC’s New Hepatitis C Screening Guidelines

Rohnert Park, CA, August 16, 2012 – A long awaited move by the Centers for Disease Control was announced today, when the agency released its recommendation that all persons born between 1945 and 1965 (“baby boomers”) receive a one-time hepatitis C test.

“The National Viral Hepatitis Roundtable (NVHR) fully supports this recommendation and will work with its 230 member organizations to educate the general public and health care providers about this critically important step in identifying the population with the highest number of hepatitis C virus (HCV) infections,” said NVHR director Martha Saly.

The CDC estimates that more than 2 million baby boomers have HCV, accounting for more than 75% of Americans living with this disease. More than 15,000 Americans die of HCV annually; yet most people with HCV do not know that they have the disease because it is often asymptomatic. Offering a one-time HCV blood test to baby boomers could identify more than 800,000 additional people with HCV and save 120,000 lives.

“The CDC's new, age-based hepatitis C screening guidelines are a bold and important move,” said Dr. Andrew Muir, Director of Hepatology at Duke University and NVHR Steering Committee member. “I have met too many patients who were diagnosed with hepatitis C at the time they developed liver cancer or when they needed a liver transplant. By removing the stigma associated with some of the risk factors of hepatitis C, more Americans will get screened and get the treatment they need before cirrhosis and liver cancer develop and shorten their lives.”

The number of deaths from HCV will grow in the coming years, especially among people who have been unknowingly infected for thirty to forty years. According to the CDC, if the people who are currently infected with HCV do not receive care, 1.76 million will develop cirrhosis, approximately 400,000 will develop liver cancer, and approximately 1 million will die of related complications between the mid 2020s and mid 2030s.

Since 1998, the CDC has recommended HCV testing for anyone at high risk of infection. This group included people who had ever injected drugs, or had undergone blood transfusions or organ transplant prior to 1992. Further, the CDC recommended testing for healthcare, emergency medical and public safety workers who have been exposed to HCV, babies born to HCV-positive mothers, and people infected with HIV. The new recommendation includes all persons born between 1945 and 1965, regardless of whether they fall into these risk categories.

“These new recommendations will help to identify more individuals who may have known risk factors for hepatitis C, but who don’t want to talk about them with their doctor, and they will also be critical for identifying the many people who don’t know how or when they became infected,” said Saly. “I was very lucky to be tested, treated and cured twelve years ago. For every person like me, there are three people with hepatitis C out there who don’t know they have it.”

About NVHR: The National Viral Hepatitis Roundtable (NVHR) is a coalition of public, private and voluntary organizations dedicated to reducing the incidence of infection, morbidity and mortality from viral hepatitis in the United States. We accomplish this by advocating for at-risk populations, convening visionary leaders, and coordinating a unified national response to viral hepatitis based on current research.