

It's Time to Improve Access to Hepatitis C Treatment in Ontario

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Every year we recognize July 28 as World Hepatitis Day.

This year, over 100 events will be organized across Canada, including at the Brampton Garden Square where there will be a BBQ, to raise awareness about the need to treat individuals with hepatitis and prevent the spread of this viral disease.

Hepatitis comes in many forms including hepatitis C.

Currently, there are approximately 110,000 Ontarians living with hepatitis C and nearly half of individuals with hepatitis C are unaware they have this disease. Individuals can live with hepatitis C for many years without experiencing any symptoms, even though the disease slowly damages their liver.

If left untreated, hepatitis C can lead to cirrhosis, liver cancer and, ultimately, death.

There is a cure for hepatitis C, with new treatments showing a 95 per cent effectiveness rate in curing individuals with hepatitis C. While new treatments have shown great promise in curing individuals with hepatitis C, many individuals cannot access these highly effective treatments until they meet restrictive clinical criteria that demand an individual's liver be halfway to cirrhosis.

Ontario is lagging behind in helping bring an end to this viral disease. Provinces including Quebec, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick have begun the process of removing or loosening eligibility requirements for individuals to access publicly-funded treatment.

The cost of inaction is far greater than the cost of treatment. Without these highly effective treatments that cost approximately \$55,000, an individual with hepatitis C can cost the health care system up to \$330,000 in health costs.

We have an opportunity to help eliminate the single most burdensome infectious disease in Canada. That is why I introduced my private member's bill, Bill 216 the Greater Access to Hepatitis C Treatment Act, 2016.

My private member's bill will ensure every individual in Ontario with hepatitis C will receive treatment upon the recommendation from their physician, no matter what stage their disease is in. If Bill 216 is passed or adopted, an individual will no longer have to wait and let their liver further deteriorate before receiving life-saving treatment.

This important initiative has received recognition from organizations including Action Hepatitis Canada and the Canadian Liver Foundation. Adam Cook of Action Hepatitis Canada wrote, "in the absence of a coherent national plan to fight hepatitis C, Canada cannot fight this epidemic, let alone make good on our commitments to the WHO to eliminate this disease by 2030. Bill 216 is the first instance of a province attempting to take leadership on this issue and stop the needless suffering of hundreds of thousands of Canadians who are not sick enough to be eligible for a cure."

In addition, Dr. Morris Sherman, Chairman of the Canadian Liver Foundation wrote, "today we have drug therapies that can cure hepatitis C but if we limit access based on restrictive criteria, we will continue to have low numbers of people treated and ever increasing cases of liver cancer and avoidable deaths. Removing the criteria on treatment access can help save lives and over the long-term save the health care system millions in acute care costs associated with end stage liver disease and transplants. The Canadian Liver Foundation is therefore in full support of the Greater Access to Hepatitis C Treatment Act."

If you are interested in reading the Greater Access to Hepatitis C Treatment Act, 2016, please visit www.sylviajonesmpp.ca. To learn more about hepatitis C in Ontario or receive a copy of my private member's bill the Greater Access to Hepatitis C Treatment Act, 2016 please call my office at 416-325-1898 or sylvia.jonesla@pc.ola.org.