

# SOUTH CAUCASUS GOING ABOVE AND BEYOND TO ELIMINATE HEPATITIS C IN THE COUNTRY OF GEORGIA

*Georgia is the first country to take on the challenge of completely eliminating Hepatitis C (HCV)—a serious viral infection—and they're using a team of international disease detectives to find out how it's spreading.*

To stop a disease in its tracks, you need to get ahead of it. But if the disease you're tracking doesn't respect boundaries, then neither can you. This may mean going off the beaten path into remote villages where your GPS doesn't work, or into people's homes and businesses. Sometimes people speak your language, and sometimes they don't.

In the country of Georgia, the culprit is HCV, affecting almost 7% of the population. Over time, HCV can cause liver damage and even liver cancer. As part of an ongoing collaboration between the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Georgia's National Center for Disease Control, epidemiologist Dr. Stephanie Salyer, who is based in Atlanta, and her team conducted a door-to-door survey to find out how HCV is spreading.

## A UNIQUE SET OF CHALLENGES

Communication was the first challenge. Some Georgian citizens speak Armenian and Azerbaijani languages, but little to no Georgian. To address this, multilingual field staff from Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan were hired to conduct the survey.

The teams also found navigation challenging, particularly in rural areas. Despite using GPS to find survey locations, teams sometimes ended up hiking in the middle of nowhere past abandoned houses.

But perhaps the most difficult challenge was "hearing heartbreaking stories from people in the field with Hepatitis C. A lot of team members personally knew people impacted by this disease," said Stephanie.

## PUTTING DATA TO WORK

Survey results are already informing national strategy. Experts assumed that HCV in Georgia could be traced back to intravenous drug use, reusing syringes, or being previously incarcerated. New information may indicate that transmission could also be associated with lack of infection control surrounding medical and dental procedures, and even tattoo parlors and manicure salons. Data is making researchers and policymakers look in new directions.

Stephanie recalls the commitment of the survey teams: "I would have to force them to come back at the end of the day," she says. "They really went above and beyond."

Progress in eliminating HCV in Georgia is a product of strong collaboration between the U.S. CDC's Division of Viral Hepatitis in Atlanta and Georgia's National Center for Disease Control.

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*Locating survey households.*

Read the full story: [http://www.cdc.gov/globalhealth/healthprotection/gdd/stories/georgia\\_eliminate\\_hepatitis.html](http://www.cdc.gov/globalhealth/healthprotection/gdd/stories/georgia_eliminate_hepatitis.html)