Dear Colleagues:

During the month of May, the Nation commemorates National Hepatitis Awareness Month and on May 19, national Hepatitis Testing Day. Both of these observances are a time for action to raise awareness of viral hepatitis as a major public health threat in the United States (U.S.), and encourage testing to identify the millions living with these often silent infections. These observances also provide opportunities to promote other interventions that prevent viral hepatitis, from childhood and adult immunization to safer injection practices among persons who inject drugs.

Millions of Americans are living with hepatitis B virus (HBV) and hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection, and every year more than 22,000 death certificates list HBV (2,000) or HCV (20,000) among causes of death. Yet these deaths are preventable if persons get tested, know they are infected, and receive lifesaving care and treatment for HBV or HCV.

According to the latest 2015 surveillance data compiled by CDC, the number of new (acute) infections of HBV and HCV are rising in the U.S. For example, compared to 2014, the number of reported cases of acute hepatitis B increased 20.7% to 3,370 cases in 2015, and the number of reported cases of acute hepatitis C increased 11% to 2,436 cases in 2015. These increases are occurring despite developments of interventions that prevent viral hepatitis. Although tens of thousands of Americans die of HCV and HBV, only about half of people living with viral hepatitis know they are infected. A safe and effective vaccine prevents HBV transmission, yet coverage of this vaccine remains low among adults at risk for hepatitis B. Increases of HCV incidence are the result of substantial increases in transmission among people who inject drugs. Comprehensive approaches are needed to combat the dual epidemics of opioid addiction and injection-related infectious diseases. Comprehensive syringe services programs (SSPs) are one of many tools that communities can use to prevent hepatitis and other injection-related infectious diseases. Yet, comprehensive SSPs are not always available. These programs also help link people to treatment to stop drug use, testing for infectious diseases that can be spread to others, and other medical care. Findings from a recent publication, Geographic disparities in access to syringe services programs among young people with hepatitis C virus infection in the U.S., show that the majority of young persons in the U.S. living with HCV have limited access to SSPs; with the largest gaps in access found in the South and Midwest. In addition, policies related to hepatitis treatment as well as SSPs vary by jurisdiction, State HCV Incidence and Policies Related to Preventive Services, and Treatment Services for Persons Who Inject Drugs.

The nation is also seeing an increase in HCV infections among women of childbearing age. These infections are a threat to the health of both the mother and the child. A recent study using national birth certificate data, found that from 2009–2014, the rate of HCV infection among women with a recent live birth in the U.S. nearly doubled. This increase in maternal HCV infection mirrors increases in acute HCV infection rates (incidence) among adults, particularly young adults in the U.S.
The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine recently reviewed the effectiveness of the interventions available to prevent HBV and HCV transmission and disease. Findings from the review led to the development of A National Strategy for the Elimination of Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C as public health threats by 2030. Implementing interventions known to be effective and ongoing collaborations with diverse stakeholders are key as we begin to look toward these goals with activities outlined in the 2017-2020 HHS National Viral Hepatitis Action Plan and the Division of Viral Hepatitis Strategic Plan, 2016-2020.

We can prevent new viral hepatitis infections, improve the health of millions of infected persons, and reduce deaths, while also moving toward elimination of viral hepatitis in the United States. We look forward to working with all of you because we cannot do it alone. Thank you for your commitment and hard work.

Sincerely,

John W. Ward, M.D.
Director,
Division of Viral Hepatitis
National Center for HIV, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention
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Jonathan Mermin, M.D., M.P.H. (RADM, USPHS)
Director
National Center for HIV, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention