

Step Up

HCV TESTING TARGETS BASEBALL LOVERS

by Larry Buhl

This summer a pilot program was launched to raise awareness of the importance of testing for the hepatitis C virus (HCV). Step Up to the Plate Against Hepatitis C is a partnership between the American Liver Foundation (ALF), Merck, the Coalition on Positive Health Empowerment, and OraSure Technologies to reach out to people during the great American pastime, baseball.

Throughout September, the program brought in medical professionals to conduct free and confidential blood tests for hepatitis C at Busch Stadium (St. Louis Cardinals), Comiskey Park (Chicago White Sox), and Minute Maid Park (Houston Astros). Several screenings had been already held in August at these parks and at Wrigley Field in Chicago.

The quick, finger-stick blood test was run by skilled staff from the health departments in each of the cities. Testing began two hours before the game, and continued until the second inning. Participants picked up their results at halftime, or at the end of the game. Anyone who tested positive was immediately linked to care.

Fans have been very responsive to the testing, OraSure spokesperson Ron Ticho tells *A&U*. “The fact that they can get tested and receive the results in relatively short order relieves a tremendous amount of anxiety that goes along with the test.”

There is no obvious link between baseball and HCV, unless you consider that all kinds of Americans get HCV and all kinds of Americans like baseball, according to Dr. Joseph Galati, who came up with the idea after the wife of a friend was diagnosed with the virus.

Thirty-five years after a blood transfusion during a pregnancy, Jane Hendricks, wife of sports manager Alan Hendricks, learned to her surprise that she had HCV. Last year she enrolled in a research program with new HCV meds, boceprevir (sold by Merck as Victrelis) along with the standard treatment of pegylated interferon

and ribavirin. “I said to Alan, ‘Let’s get the word out about hepatitis C by screening baseball fans.’ With his contacts Alan organized the event, and I went to Merck for underwriting, and here we are.”

“Step Up to the Plate is for those at risk of HCV; that is, John Q. Public,” Galati continues. “Those with well-known risk factors such as tattoos, blood transfusions before 1992, those who have taken any drugs, and to a much lesser extent unprotected sex, constitutes a huge cross-section of the population and most of them have no idea they might have the virus.”

Chronic hepatitis C is the most common blood-borne viral disease in the United States infecting approximately 3.2 million Americans. According to the ALF, programs like Step Up to the Plate help reverse common misinformation:

- that hepatitis C is not a problem as long as you don’t have symptoms.
- that hepatitis C only affects illegal IV drug users—there are many other ways a person could become infected.
- that hepatitis C is prevented by a vaccine. There are vaccines for hepatitis A and B—but none for C, the ALF emphasizes.

Galati underscores the ALF’s recommendation for even outwardly healthy people to be tested. “Many with HCV have no symptoms and by the time they do the disease is quite serious. When people are asymptomatic the disease is not dormant. It is active and doing damage.” Sometimes the damage comes out as vague



complaints at first—aching joints and muscles, which doctors too often assume is age-related. “Their doctors will say, ‘Just eat better and exercise more,’ and the conversation ends there.”

For people who carry HCV and who consume even modest amounts of alcohol, or have HIV or hepatitis B or are overweight, the number of people who develop serious HCV complications, such as cirrhosis, could be as high as fifty percent, Galati says.

Hendricks, who was asymptomatic when she received her diagnosis of HCV, could have developed complications, even decades after exposure, even though she had no obvious symptoms, Galati said. Seven months after completing antiretroviral treatment she is clear of HCV.

Galati said Merck and ALF will be analyzing the results of the pilot test and will likely go wider by offering testing in more ballparks throughout the country next season.

To learn more about chronic hepatitis C and other upcoming free testing dates visit www.AllAboutHepC.com/baseball.

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