In hepatitis C: Curing the incurable

By ACSH Staff — April 5, 2012

Although not nearly as well-known as AIDS, hepatitis C affects about 200 million people worldwide about four times the number of HIV cases. In the U.S. alone, about 4 million people are infected. Hepatitis C, which is usually transmitted through contact with infected blood, causes a slow but progressive deterioration of liver function, leading to cirrhosis and sometimes liver cancer. There were no satisfactory therapies for the infection until last year, when Merck and Vertex each launched a protease inhibitor-type drug an anti-viral analogous to those used successfully in taming HIV. When added to the existing standard therapies, the new drugs essentially doubled the cure rate. Yet one of the remaining problems with this treatment option is that it includes interferon, which is very difficult to tolerate due to its severe side effects, which include depression, nausea, and flu-like symptoms.

However, ACSH’s Dr. Josh Bloom predicted last year [1] that the Holy Grail of hepatitis C therapy curing the disease without the use of interferon might be discovered by Abbott Laboratories. And a new study suggests [2] that this now could be the case. According to recent research, hepatitis C patients who had never before received treatment and were given Abbott’s latest four-drug cocktail showed an astounding 95 percent cure rate. In more difficult cases, where patients had already tried and failed other therapies (and were generally regarded as untreatable), 47 percent were cured. Best of all, this novel drug combination does not include interferon the first time this has been possible.

This just goes to show that pharmaceutical critics, like Marcia Angell of the Harvard School of Public Health, who criticize so-called me-too drugs as being non-innovative are displaying their ignorance about drug development, says Dr. Bloom. The second or third drug in a new class is often superior to the original. Such changes can add up to enormous medical advantages, despite what vocal critics wrongly maintain.

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