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Laugesen: Colorado Medicaid discriminating against patients with hepatitis C

by **Dede Laugesen** on February 8, 2016

Colorado's Medicaid coverage restrictions on new hepatitis C cures are discriminating against patients with the disease.



Dede Laugesen

A recent meeting of the Colorado Legislature's Joint Budget Committee reinforced that point as legislators asked a ranking state health official why Colorado Medicaid helps so few hepatitis C patients in time to save money and lives.

"People with hepatitis C have a much, much higher rate of alcohol dependence, of behavioral health conditions, and of other chronic diseases like diabetes and high cholesterol," said Dr. Judy Zerzan, chief medical officer and director of Colorado's Clinical Services Office. "So treating hepatitis C would not make these other costs go away."

State Sen. Pat Steadman, D-Denver, questioned the wisdom of rejecting hepatitis C treatments that are 95 percent effective at

curing the deadly blood-borne illness. Eliminating the condition in earlier stages, he argued, would reduce transmission and costs of future complications.

“If (we are) able to cure something and prevent all these downstream complications, what value do we place on that?” Steadman asked.

State Rep. Dianne Primavera, D-Broomfield, also asked why Colorado Medicaid would not want to cure patients who can spread the disease at any stage. “To me, that’s a good preventive measure,” she said.

Zerzan again responded by negatively characterizing the lifestyles of hepatitis C patients. “The new spread of the disease is largely among injection drug users,” Zerzan said.

Medicaid has responded to new treatment costs by approving them only for the sickest patients, leaving them exposed to progressing toward liver cancer.

“HCPF’s restriction of these new cures is unconscionable,” said Linda Pryor, board president of Liver Health Connection (formerly Hep C Connection), referring to Colorado’s Department of Health Care Policy Financing. “There are multiple risk factors for contracting hepatitis C, including those reported in early February by Swedish Medical Center whose innocent victims now have to be screened. There is a continuing pervasive and demeaning attitude by HCPF to treat hepatitis C patients as second-class citizens.”

According to HCPF, about 8,500 Colorado Medicaid patients suffer from hepatitis C, also known as HCV. It is the leading cause of liver cancer. As of late 2015, 645 Colorado Medicaid patients had requested new treatments; only 175 were approved.

“We wouldn’t say to a breast cancer patient, ‘We’re going to wait until you’re sicker before we treat you.’ Why withhold treatment for hepatitis C patients?” asked Nancy Steinfurth, executive director of Liver Health Connection.

Medicaid bases restrictions on progression of liver damage, represented by a fibrosis score. A patient must reach 3 or 4 on a scale of 0 to 4 to obtain coverage.

At stages 3 and 4, patients typically suffer from so many disease-related conditions they cost taxpayers considerably more than if they had been cured sooner. Some die. Others need costly liver transplants Medicaid could have avoided.

Legislation to establish earlier treatment for hepatitis C would be a win-win. It would save taxpayer dollars, while saving lives.

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About Dede Laugesen

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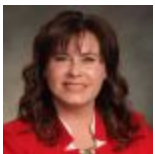
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