Health leaders and politicians call for hepatitis C elimination strategy in Northern Ireland

- Elected Members of the Legislative Assembly and patient group representatives will meet with leading clinicians and service providers today to discuss the need for a region-wide strategy for the elimination of hepatitis C in Northern Ireland
- The Northern Ireland Executive remains the only administration within the United Kingdom not to have published a long-term strategy for hepatitis C

MAIDENHEAD, Oct. 17, 2017 – Elected Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and patient group representatives are set to meet with leading clinicians and service providers today to discuss the need for a strategy to address how hepatitis C is prevented, diagnosed, and treated in Northern Ireland. Across the UK, there has been a renewed focus to address the elimination of hepatitis C, with a nearly 10% fall in the number of deaths in England over the last year. This is largely due to increased treatment and access to new direct-acting antiviral drugs. The Northern Ireland administration remains the only devolved healthcare economy in the UK not to have published a long-term strategy for hepatitis C, a now curable blood-borne virus. The meeting, hosted by leading UK charity The Hepatitis C Trust, alongside biopharmaceutical company AbbVie, aims to support a national commitment aligned to the World Health Organization’s goal of eliminating hepatitis C as a public health threat by 2030.

Charles Gore, chief executive of The Hepatitis C Trust and Chair of today’s meeting said: “It’s not every day that we get to talk about how we eliminate a deadly disease. With recent advances in medicines we believe that hepatitis C could be eliminated in the UK by 2030. This will require efforts along the whole care pathway to ensure access to life saving treatments is a possibility for the many. Today’s meeting is an opportunity to scale up our response and improve services so that more people are tested, treated and cured in Northern Ireland.”

In order to serve Northern Ireland’s current patient population, a local focus is required to address the barriers to testing, treatment and care that currently exist in the national healthcare system. Often poor service provision is compounded by failure to address the needs of different groups living with hepatitis C. The elimination of hepatitis C relies on patients getting access to testing, treatment and care, yet in Northern Ireland it’s estimated that over 50% of patients fail to access treatment.

Chris Rintoul, from social justice charity, Extern, said “There has been a sudden rise in the number of people who inject drugs (including steroids), as seen from the figures in our needle exchanges and demand for addiction treatment services. Sharing of any injecting equipment, often unintentionally, can lead to serious health implications through the transmission of several blood borne viruses. We are seeing a big increase in new infections, especially among the homeless population. At least half of those living with hepatitis C in Northern Ireland are current or former drug users. This already marginalised population needs support with the health conditions that arise from using drugs, not just with their addictions. We welcome new treatments for hepatitis C that are more accessible and acceptable to drug users.”

Hepatitis C is a curable blood borne virus that often goes unnoticed due to a lack of presenting symptoms. Between 1990 and 2015 at least 54% of individuals who tested positive for hepatitis C, never presented for treatment. Without treatment, people can develop potentially fatal liver cancer or end stage liver disease.
Dr Alice Butler, Medical Director, AbbVie UK, the biopharmaceutical company that is co-hosting today’s meeting, commented, “We’ve been working with many stakeholders to facilitate improvements to hepatitis C services across the UK. Often this involves taking adult health services out of the hospital and into the communities to reach more people who might be at risk or already infected. By doing this in partnership with patient groups and organisations that work with the NHS, we’re able to support hundreds of people who would otherwise go untreated and prevent many others from getting the virus in the first place.”

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Notes to Editors

About AbbVie
AbbVie is a global, research-driven biopharmaceutical company committed to developing innovative advanced therapies for some of the world’s most complex and critical conditions. The company’s mission is to use its expertise, dedicated people and unique approach to innovation to markedly improve treatments across four primary therapeutic areas: immunology, oncology, virology and neuroscience. In more than 75 countries, AbbVie employees are working every day to advance health solutions for people around the world. For more information about AbbVie, please visit us at www.abbvie.co.uk and on Twitter @abbvieuk.

About The Hepatitis C Trust
The Hepatitis C Trust is the national UK charity for hepatitis C. It is committed to eliminating hepatitis C as a major public health threat by 2030, and it provides information, support and representation for all those affected by the disease. Started by patients, almost all of its governing Board of Trustees, paid staff and volunteers are patients. www.hepctrust.org.uk Helpline: 0845 223 4424

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References

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