

## **NEW TREATMENTS OFFER ABORIGINAL PEOPLE LIVING WITH HEP C HOPE OF CURE**

Aboriginal people living with hep C have something to celebrate this World Hepatitis Day – July 28<sup>th</sup>. New treatments, called direct acting antivirals (DAAs), are already curing those living with the virus.

“The new drugs have been on the PBS since 1 March this year, which means they are available and affordable to everyone,” Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Program head at the UNSW Australia’s Kirby Institute, Dr Marlene Kong said.

“There are only minor side effects. Your local GP can prescribe them and for most people, the treatment is a daily medication for only three months. This means that if you have hep C, there’s a good chance that you could be cured in three months.”

The new DAAs are considered a breakthrough in treating hep C and are available to anyone over 18 years and living in Australia who has a Medicare Card. There are no restrictions around current or previous injecting drug use or presence of liver damage.

For Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council (AH&MRC) CEO Sandra Bailey, the new treatments are much needed good news for Aboriginal communities.

“New treatments are free, have high cure rates and low side effects. The more Aboriginal people who are treated with these new DAAs for hep C, will mean healthier families and communities,” Ms Bailey. “I am pleased to say that a number of Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services are working in partnership with specialist liver clinics to ensure access for our communities, including people living in rural and regional areas.”

The new hepatitis C treatments have worked for a 53-year-old Wiradjuri woman who has had the virus since 1994 and accessed the new treatment through her Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service. Cathy is now free of the hepatitis C virus and its symptoms.

“After the full course I have no viral load in my system and now all indications are that I’m clear,” Cathy said.

Hepatitis C is diagnosed by a blood test. Dr Kong advises anyone who thinks they might be at risk, such as people who have shared injecting equipment, to take the test.

“My message to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who inject drugs or who think they may have contracted hep C in other ways, is to immediately see your health provider, get the information you need and get tested for hep C. The success rate of the new DAAs is fantastic.

“I encourage people who inject drugs to seek out needle and syringe and opioid treatment programs that you can access. It’s also important to remember that anyone with hep C should not share needles.”

Dr Kong is an Aboriginal doctor from the Worimi people of Port Stephens. Before taking up the role of program head at the Kirby Institute, she was a practicing GP at many locations across Australia.

The (AH&MRC) is the peak representative body and voice of Aboriginal communities on health in NSW. The AH&MRC represents its members, Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHSs), which deliver culturally appropriate comprehensive primary health care to their communities. For more information about the AH&MRC visit [www.ahmrc.org.au](http://www.ahmrc.org.au).

For more information on the new hep C treatments you can talk to your doctor, your AMS or call the Hepatitis Helpline 1800 803 990. You can also find out more by visiting the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council website <http://www.ahmrc.org.au/hepc.php> or Hepatitis NSW <https://www.hep.org.au/hep-c-treatment/>

Hepatitis Awareness Week is from the 25th – 29<sup>th</sup> July 2016, with World Hepatitis Day on the 28 July 2016.

**Caption 1: AH&MRC CEO Sandra Bailey**

**Caption 2: Dr Marlene Kong**