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New help for local patients with Hepatitis C

By [Judy Benson](#) Day Staff Writer

New London - Many of the patients Nurse Practitioner Mary Blankson cares for at the Community Health Center are infected with the Hepatitis C virus, yet she has been unable to provide them treatment.

Until now, that is.

"It's a chronic illness, but not something primary care providers are not normally trained in," she said Friday. Many of her patients do not have access to outside specialists who can provide the interferon treatments necessary to rid the body of the virus and prevent liver failure, because they are uninsured or covered by Medicaid, which specialists often don't accept. In all, 281 of the 12,320 New London and Groton health center patients have tested positive for Hepatitis C, according to center spokeswoman Eliza Cole.

But beginning Friday, with the activation of a new video-based conference program, Blankson and her colleagues at the New London center and five others will be able to offer interferon treatments.

Called CHC Project ECHO, the program brings together specialists from the health center's main sites in Middletown, Meriden and New Britain, where Hepatitis C treatment was available, with health care providers at its satellite offices in New London, Bristol, Norwalk, Waterbury, Clinton and Enfield via a once-a-week video conference in which cases are presented and treatment plans discussed.

Case managers, a clinical pharmacist and others who provide patient support services also participate in the conference to offer their insights into how to overcome financial, transportation and other hurdles that may be obstacles to care.

Modeled after a project developed at the University of New Mexico, it is also being used by health center practitioners to brainstorm treatments for HIV patients, of whom there are 36 at the Groton and New London sites. In the future, the program may be expanded to include treatment of patients with chronic pain and other ailments.

"This allows me to access the guidance and wisdom" to be able to provide the interferon treatments, Blankson said. "Interferon is a very rough treatment, and you need to watch a patient's blood work carefully. You need a coach, someone to encourage you through it."

There is also a mechanism to submit questions to the experts mid-week, Blankson added.

Dr. David Anderson, vice president and chief quality officer for CHC, said that Hepatitis C is "a growing illness," spread primarily through sharing needles for drug injection. Routine screenings for HIV and Hepatitis done on every CHC patient have revealed that about

1,600 patients across the 13 CHC clinics statewide have Hepatitis C.

"But the vast majority have not gotten treatment," Anderson said. It can lie dormant in a person's system for decades, he said, before symptoms begin.

"You want to treat it before the symptoms start," he said. "It is treatable, but there are lots of side effects to the treatments. That's why you need a team approach. It definitely takes a lot of hands-on support."

During the inaugural video conference Friday, Bernadette Thomas, advance practice registered nurse at the CHC's Clinton site, presented the cases of two women from her office in the shoreline community. One had HIV as well as Hepatitis C, depression and other illnesses, and the other had Hepatitis C and hypertension, and had been a victim of domestic violence. Thomas wanted to start interferon treatment for both, but needed advice with helping her patients overcome insurance, transportation and other hurdles.

Dr. Marwan Haddad, medical director of HIV, Hepatitis C and Buprenorphine services for CHC, seated at a table in the center's main offices in Middletown with four other experts, suggested ways to get the patients connected to case managers and other support services.

"She just needs to be reassured that no matter what bills she's getting, they will be covered," he said, referring to one of the patients who was reluctant to get treatment because of the costs, but was eligible for coverage through a special fund. "Insurance should not be an issue."

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