

Many Heroes and Heroines at SF's Hep B Free Campaign

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The San Francisco Hep B Free campaign has put San Francisco at the forefront in the nation's fight against hepatitis B. The program, a first-of-its-kind collaboration with city government, private healthcare and local community organizations, seeks to educate the public about hepatitis B in an effort to eradicate the disease in San Francisco.

The campaign takes a two-pronged approach by being sure to educate all San Franciscans about the importance of fighting Hep B, while simultaneously carrying out specific outreach to Asian and Pacific Islander American (API) residents who are disproportionately affected.

In addition to education, San Francisco Hep B Free also partners with health facilities to provide free or low-cost screenings and promotes vaccination. Chronically infected individuals are encouraged to see their primary care physicians for regular monitoring and, if deemed appropriate, treatment. Those without insurance are referred to The City's 311 program, a one-stop shop for city services. Dialing 3-1-1, callers get an operator who links them with the appropriate city agency for affordable medical care.

San Francisco Hep B Free is considered a national model.

Ahead of the Curve

At a press conference held in San Francisco's Chinatown on Sept. 18, 2008, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced revised guidelines for hepatitis B that include a renewed emphasis on screening and vaccination, particularly for at-risk individuals such as immigrants from countries with a two percent or higher prevalence of chronic hepatitis B infection. For the first time, the guidelines also promote education and prescribe long-term medical care for chronically infected patients, including regular monitoring and liver cancer screening.

These measures have served as the foundation of the San Francisco Hep B Free campaign since its launch in April 2007 and were already well on their way to becoming the standard of care in San Francisco at the time of the CDC announcement.

In fact, Dr. Samuel So, one of the organizers of San Francisco Hep B Free, served as a consultant to the CDC and helped draft the new guidelines. Since 1996, So, founder of the Asian Liver Center at Stanford University, has fought for health officials in the United States and abroad to address hepatitis B's disproportionate impact on segments of the population, particularly Asians, and to promote screening, vaccination and long-term care as proven solutions to soaring hepatitis-B-related liver disease and liver cancer rates around the world.

An estimated one out of ten APIs is infected with chronic hepatitis B. One-quarter of infected APIs die of liver failure or liver cancer. One-third of San Francisco's population is of Asian descent, and San Francisco currently has the highest liver cancer rates in the country. Dr. So was the first to connect these dots and act. In 2006, he pitched to the San Francisco Department of Public Health the idea of screening all of The City's API residents.

"And they were crazy enough to say, 'Okay, let's do it,' " So jokes.

The stage for San Francisco Hep B Free was further set that year when the Asian Liver Center partnered with AsianWeek Foundation to provide free screenings at the Foundation's annual Asian Heritage Street Celebration. More than 500 people were tested on-site in just over five hours, demonstrating to those involved, and to city health officials, the benefits of a community-based approach to battling the disease.

Hard Numbers

To date, more than 4,000 people have been screened for hepatitis B at San Francisco Hep B Free sites and events. While that number is impressive, organizers say that perhaps tens of thousands other San Franciscans have been touched by the campaign, getting tested and/or vaccinated by their primary care doctors after becoming aware of their risk of infection.

"We believe that the best place for people to be tested is at their doctor's office," says Janet Zola, health promotion specialist with the S.F. Department of Public Health's Communicable Disease Control and Prevention Section. "But we are aware that going to a doctor's office can be a barrier for some in terms of convenience and cost, which is why we created these public-access sites."

Everyone tested receives written notification of their results. Those who would benefit from being vaccinated are encouraged to do so. Those whose results indicate chronic infection are encouraged to see a doctor for regular monitoring and liver cancer screening and to determine whether treatment is necessary. Not all persons with chronic hepatitis B require medication.

A New Look and Expanded Focus

At the press conference on Sept. 18, where the CDC announced its new guidelines, the organizers of San Francisco Hep B Free also announced the launch of the campaign's second phase that focuses on expanded public awareness.

"The first phase of SF Hep B Free was creating the necessary infrastructure to provide these services," Zola says. "This partnership between the healthcare industry, the City of San Francisco and API-serving nonprofits has allowed us to create a net to catch the hepatitis B cases that so often go undiagnosed and untreated until it's too late."

Because chronically infected individuals seldom exhibit symptoms until later stages of the disease, when cirrhosis, liver disease and liver cancer can result, hepatitis B is considered a silent killer.

With the infrastructure for battling the disease being put in place, next on the campaign's agenda is engaging in massive public awareness efforts, including the sides of buses, billboards, wallscapes, transit shelters, underground transit stations and taxi tops. San Francisco Hep B Free was also recently named the major beneficiary for a local radio station's latest benefit mix CD.

Additionally, the campaign is zeroing in on the API community, which is the most affected population. Outreach to Asians and Pacific Islanders includes grassroots organizing, targeted public relations, social marketing and advertising.

"Outreach has proven a missing link in previous efforts to combat the disease," explains Ted Fang of the AsianWeek Foundation, a key organizer of San Francisco Hep B Free. "By really reaching out to affected communities, we hope to encourage more APIs to take advantage of the testing, vaccination and treatment services being provided by the healthcare industry.

"By simultaneously reaching out to all of San Francisco," Fang continues, "people are understanding that the ramifications of hepatitis B affect everyone, and we are able to garner the support to make institutional changes towards defeating this disease. San Francisco has the highest rate of liver cancer in the U.S. That affects everyone, not just Asian Americans.

SF Hep B Free is also paying special attention to new immigrants, low-income and predominantly Asian-language populations for whom language barriers often prevent seeking preventive healthcare. Outreach efforts utilize a combination of Asian-language and culturally sensitive English-language materials.

Los Angeles-based advertising agency interTrend Communications is largely responsible for the look and feel of Phase Two of the campaign. The agency was called upon for its expertise in marketing to the API community. The challenge presented to them,

however, was to create an ad campaign that appealed to all San Franciscans, yet also addressed the difference in infection rates between Asians and non-Asians.

The resulting superhero-themed ads prominently feature APIs, and urge all viewers to take responsibility for their own health and “B a Hero.” The ads were unveiled at the Sept. 18 press conference and can already be seen throughout San Francisco.

“Setting the right tone for the campaign was also very important,” explains interTrend Communications CEO Julia Huang. “A lot of health campaigns try to scare people into action. We wanted to empower people instead. We wanted to inspire them to act. And I think people are responding to that tone.”

Only in San Francisco?

Several American and European cities have already expressed interest in replicating San Francisco Hep B Free.

“It’s no coincidence [that San Francisco has emerged as a leader],” says Dr. Stewart Cooper, director of California Pacific Medical Center’s Liver Disease Management & Transplant Program. “We have some of the best liver doctors in the country here. And we have the biotech industry right at our doorstep.”

“And we have a very progressive and proactive health department,” adds Dr. So, “and community-based leadership.”

But Dr. Gillian Zeldin, gastroenterologist and director of Medical Affairs, Infectious Disease and Transplant Immunology with Novartis Pharmaceuticals, also credits the success of San Francisco Hep B Free to a strong sense of community and a passionate activist spirit that’s as old as The City itself.

“San Francisco has a long history of grassroots organizing,” Zeldin says. “It’s a very unique city. It’s a big city that acts like a small city, and it’s a community that pulls together.”

“To watch an entire community — nonprofits, local government, academic centers and industry — take on hepatitis B prevention as a public health mission and really own it is exhilarating,” says Dr. John Ward, director of the CDC’s Division of Viral Hepatitis. “It’s one of the finest examples of community mobilization that I can think of.”

“I have to admit, I have a little San Francisco envy,” interTrend’s Huang jokes. “It’s really astounding how San Francisco Hep B Free has galvanized the community. And when I say ‘community,’ I mean the entire city. Hepatitis B seems to be on everyone’s radar, Asian and non-Asian, which is amazing. I’m really energized by that.”