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## **Lifestyle**

### **Liver cancer preventable, says US doctor**

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By Tessa R. Salazar  
Inquirer News Service

ONE in 10 Filipinos has chronic Hepatitis B, and Hepatitis B infections can cause liver cancer. Believe it or not, it's that common. Imagine, if you go to a restaurant, and there are a hundred Filipinos there, chances are 10 of them have Hepatitis B and they don't know it. One in four Hepa B sufferers will die from it.

#### **Preventable**

If you have chronic Hepatitis B, there's a 25-percent chance that, without treatment or monitoring, you will die from it. Every year, about 4,000 Filipinos die from liver cancer. But liver cancer is preventable since there is already a vaccine for Hepatitis B.

Liver cancer in the Philippines is the second most common cancer in men, and ninth most common among women. Usually, liver cancer exhibits no symptoms until it's too late. At the time one develops symptoms, usually he only has three to six months to live.

So, doctors stress the only way to improve survival from liver cancer is to either detect it early on, or prevent it altogether.

Just like the AIDS virus HIV, the Hepa B infection can be passed on from mother to child. If the mother carries the infection at birth, and the newborn doesn't get vaccinated, then the newborn becomes the next-generation carrier.

And much like the way HIV is transmitted, Hepa B can also be passed on from one sexual partner to another, or through contaminated needles.

#### **Vaccine for Hepa B**

The only good news is that unlike HIV, there's the vaccine for Hepa B.

"This is the only cancer you can prevent by a vaccine. But what is sad is that over 600,000 people in the world die from this, and a lot of them are Asians," said Dr. Samuel So, director of the Liver Cancer Program and the Asian Liver Center at Stanford University in California.

Said So: "We have had the vaccine for over 20 years, and still not enough people are taking it. Every 30 seconds, one person in the world dies of liver cancer, which is totally preventable."

"Vaccination is a one-time thing, a one-time protection for the individual and the family,

and it can protect you for life. (When vaccinated,) even if I come into contact with contaminated blood or people with Hepatitis B, I am protected," he said.

So, an advocate for liver cancer prevention in the United States, visited the Philippines on April 30 with Diana Vaca of the American Cancer Society's international affairs and May Sung of ACS California division.

A surgeon, So operates on people suffering from Hepatitis B every week.

### **Asian scourge**

Hepatitis B seems to take a liking to Asians. So observes liver cancer is 11 times more common among Asian-Americans because Hepatitis B seems to be more common in this group. According to him, Chinese or Filipino-Americans have that one in 10 chance of contracting chronic Hepatitis B. Caucasians, on the other hand, have a one in 1,000 chance.

He added that Hepatitis B affects people between 35 and 60 years old. Thus, people dying from it often leave behind a young family with children, and the social impact is heavier.

People who often consult So are on their 30s and 40s, and he would find out these people already had advanced liver cancer.

"That's what motivated me to become an advocate. I am tired of people dying from a disease that can be prevented," said So.

"For decades, we have done nothing more aggressive in eradicating this problem," he said. "And this is a major problem for Asians. It's not a big problem for the Caucasian community because they never experienced a high incidence."

### **Much cheaper**

On the option of liver transplants, So said it would be better to spend resources preventing a disease, and it would also be much cheaper. "You can get vaccinated for free or \$10, versus a lifetime of spending \$5 every day for medicine to keep your body from rejecting the transplanted organ."

Filipino oncologist Dr. Kelly Salvador told So and the American Cancer Society representatives that since 2003 the Philippine Cancer Society had been heavily participating in cancer prevention campaigns.

The top two causes of cancer deaths among male in the country are lung and liver cancers, both of which are preventable. Liver cancer is also the third leading cancer site for both sexes. In 1998, 5,249 new liver cancer cases and 4,403 deaths were recorded.