CUH consultant welcomes new drugs to tackle the ‘silent killer’ of hepatitis C

12 November 2015

Following preliminary positive recommendations announced in July, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) has recommended three new treatments for some adults with hepatitis C.

In the UK, most hepatitis C infections occur in people who inject drugs or have injected them in the past. If left untreated for many years, some people with hepatitis C will develop scarring of the liver - cirrhosis - and over time, this can cause the liver to stop.

It's estimated that around 215,000 people in the UK have hepatitis C. Only half of people are aware they have it and it is often referred to as the ‘silent killer’. In Cambridgeshire there is an estimated 1,379 people that are living with hepatitis C.

Dr Will Gelson, liver consultant at Addenbrooke's, said: "It's one of the biggest medical breakthroughs in the last five years. It was very difficult to cure hepatitis in a lot of patients particularly with advanced liver disease. We were transplanting a lot of patients with Hepatitis C and patients were dying of it."
"It's fantastic news for them. The treatments we were using was a bit like chemotherapy. It's fantastic patients are now able to take a 12-week course of drugs with very few side effects and a cure rate of between 80-100 per cent."

Dr Gelson, whose team treats between 100-130 patients a year with Hepatitis C, said in the past for patients who could tolerate the drugs available, they would have a 50-80 per cent cure rate depending on the strain.

Now with these drugs, the cure rate was much higher. But he said while the announcement was great news for patients, treating the condition still had a way to go. "Hepatitis C is a real health challenge and drugs are very expensive," he said. "It costs between £30-£40,000 for a 12-week course. In certain areas of the UK there's up to a two per cent prevalence of Hepatitis C.

"In the UK overall, perhaps 1 in 200 patients have hepatitis C. At the moment we're prioritising patients who are at risk of dying from it.

"The hope is between the next 20 or 30 years to eradicate the virus."

Previously, treatment used to rely on a drug called interferon, which gave symptoms similar to chemotherapy, but last April clinicians were funded by NHS England to treat patients with liver failure with a combination of these new drugs, and in August they were able to treat patients with them who have cirrhosis.

It is hoped in February/March next year, they will be able to treat all patients with hepatitis C following the final NICE approval process.

The new treatments available are:

- Harvoni, a combination of two drugs, ledipasvir and sofosbuvir. It is produced by Gilead.
- Viekirax, is a combination of three drugs, ombitasvir, paritaprevir, ritonavir and Exviera (dasabuvir). They are produced by AbbVie.