Hepatitis C in Pennsylvania

Background
Hepatitis C is a disease of the liver caused by infection with hepatitis C virus (HCV). HCV can cause permanent scarring of the liver, leading to complications such as liver failure, cancer, and ultimately death. Nationally, an estimated 3.5 million people are living with HCV, with almost 250,000 of those living in Pennsylvania. Though recent advances in treatment have increased cure rates to nearly 90%, many individuals living with the disease don’t know they’re infected.

Epidemiologic Profile
In 2016, the Pennsylvania Department of Health published the state’s first HCV epidemiologic profile using four main sources of data: surveillance of newly-reported HCV infections, hospitalizations associated with HCV diagnoses, deaths associated with HCV, and liver transplants in HCV-positive recipients. These analyses provide a foundation for understanding the burden of HCV infections and morbidity in Pennsylvania.

Risk Groups
From 2003-2014, trends in HCV morbidity and mortality differed for young adults (aged 15-39) and adults known as Baby Boomers (aged 40-69). Analyses were conducted for both groups (see “Key Findings”).

Summary
Overall, newly-reported infections of HCV declined from 2003-2014, but rates of HCV-associated hospitalizations, HCV mortality, and liver transplants in HCV-positive recipients all increased. While historically an infection affecting older patients, HCV infection is increasingly affecting young adults. Rising case and hospitalization rates among young females, especially those aged 20-29, could result in more mother-to-child transmission, affecting the next generation. The opioid and heroin epidemics contribute to this new bimodal distribution of HCV, so public health efforts aimed at tackling these issues together will be critically important.

With an aging population, mortality and transplants among the HCV population in Pennsylvania are expected to rise, and will likely translate into increased health care costs. Efforts aimed at screening and linkage to treatment could prevent further downstream morbidity and mortality. For more information, visit hep.c.pa.gov.

Key Findings: 2003-2014

Young Adults
1. Newly-reported HCV infections and HCV-associated hospitalizations increased. Since 2012, young adults have the highest rates of reported infections in the state.
2. Rates of newly-reported HCV infections and HCV-associated hospitalizations increased among females, especially those aged 20-29.
3. Whites and non-Hispanics had higher rates of HCV-associated hospitalizations than blacks and Hispanics.

Baby Boomers
4. Rates of newly-reported HCV infections declined, but rates of HCV mortality and liver transplants in HCV-positive recipients increased.
5. Males, blacks, and Hispanics had higher rates of HCV mortality and liver transplants in HCV-positive recipients than females, whites, and non-Hispanics.