Australian Prescriber

MEDIA RELEASE **5 August 2009**

Prevalence of hepatitis B in migrant communities

Chronic hepatitis B affects almost one per cent of Australians, many of whom were born in areas outside Australia with high rates of infection, such as Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Central and South America, Eastern Europe, Mediterranean Europe, the South Pacific and the Caribbean. High rates of infection also exist in indigenous populations.

Dr Sally J Bell and Dr Tin Nguyen from the Department of Gastroenterology at St Vincent's Hospital in Melbourne write about treatments for the disease and the importance of ongoing monitoring of patients with hepatitis B, in the latest edition of ***Australian Prescriber***.

"Most people with hepatitis B in Australia were infected in the womb or during childhood before they migrated. A small number of people acquire infection as adults via injecting drug use or sexual contact," the authors write.

"There are usually no symptoms of hepatitis B infection, and people from countries with high rates of infection, and those at risk of contracting it through needle use or sexual activity should be screened."

"Improved laboratory testing for viral DNA can help identify the need for treatment and long-term risk of liver damage. Therapy, which may last 12 months or longer, reduces inflammation, can improve liver injury and reduces progression to liver cirrhosis and cancer."

"Long-term monitoring is recommended to detect recurring infection and liver cancer, and consists of an abdominal ultrasound and serum alfa-fetoprotein every six months. This is especially important in high-risk patient groups – those with cirrhosis, a family history of liver cancer, Asians older than 35 years (if infected early in life) and Africans older than 20 years," the authors conclude.

To view the full article visit www.australianprescriber.com.

Media enquiries to Katie Butt, NPS Media Adviser, 0419 618 365 or kbutt@nps.org.au

Australian Prescriber is an independent peer-reviewed journal providing critical commentary on therapeutic topics for health professionals, particularly doctors in general practice. It is published by the National Prescribing Service Limited (NPS), an independent, non-profit organisation for Quality Use of Medicines funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. Australian Prescriber is distributed every two months in hard copy to health professionals, free of charge, and online in full text at ***www.australianprescriber.com***

ABN 61 082 034 393 | Level 7/418A Elizabeth Street Surry Hills 2010 | PO Box 1147 Strawberry Hills 2012
Phone: 02 8217 8700 | Fax: 02 9211 7578 | email: info@nps.org.au | web: www.nps.org.au