



4. Hepatitis C ➤ The health system

- 4.1 The health system in Australia
- 4.2 Roles of health care professionals in hepatitis C treatment
- 4.3 Will having hepatitis C affect my immigration status?

4.1 The health system in Australia

The health system is a term used to describe the many services, organisations and health care professionals providing all aspects of healthcare in the community. This includes general practitioners (GPs), nurses, specialists, hospitals, social workers, interpreters and other health services.

Finding the information and services you need can seem like an overwhelming task, especially if you are not well or if your English is limited. As a person with hepatitis C you may need to use some health services that you may not have used in the past. It is important that you know which health services are available to you and how to access them.

Your general practitioner (GP), nurse or health care professional will have a good understanding of how the health system works. They can tell you which hospitals, clinics and other services are available in your local area.

4.2 Roles of health care professionals in hepatitis C treatment

General practitioner (GP)

In Australia, most people go to a local doctor known as a general practitioner or GP when they have health problems. When you see a GP you should ask for information about hepatitis C, and about treatment.

General practitioners (GPs) are able to prescribe and supervise the new hepatitis C treatments in consultation with a specialist. Most people will be able to get treatment from a GP. However, people who have serious liver damage, other liver diseases, serious medical conditions or have taken hepatitis C treatment in the past will be referred to a liver clinic or liver specialist for treatment.

You may be able to choose a GP who speaks your language, or a GP located near to your home or work, which can be very helpful when you are on hepatitis C treatment.

If your GP *bulk bills*, your visit is free because Medicare pays the GP. If your GP does not *bulk bill*, you pay the GP first and then you claim some money back from Medicare.

Liver clinics

Liver clinics are part of hospitals and provide treatment and support services for people with hepatitis who have liver cirrhosis (damage), have been on hepatitis C treatment before or have other health problems.

There are clinics in metropolitan and regional areas. You can contact the clinic yourself to make an appointment, but to attend you will need a referral from your GP.

Specialist

A specialist is a doctor who is trained in a particular health issue. For hepatitis C, there are liver specialists. Some of these specialists are based in liver clinics and others in private practice. To see a specialist you must have a **referral letter** from your GP and make an appointment.

Specialists in liver clinics may *bulk bill* (charge Medicare) for your visit, so you will not have to pay for the consultation.

Most specialists in private practice do not *bulk bill*. Some will *bulk bill* patients with Health Care Cards.

Trainee specialist (registrar)

A registrar is a doctor that is doing further training to become a specialist. Sometimes, you may see a registrar instead of your specialist when you visit a liver clinic. The registrar works under the direct supervision of the specialist.

Nurse

The nurse's role varies in different liver clinics. In some clinics, they will give you information about hepatitis C and explain your treatment as well as help you manage any side effects. In others, the nurse may do your initial assessment, do your blood tests or the Fibroscan.

Interpreters

Health care interpreters can be present at appointments with your doctor, nurse or other health professional involved in your care. The interpreter's job is to translate everything that you and the health care professional say to each other.

Tell the receptionist that you need an interpreter when you make the appointment.

An interpreter does not take part in the discussion in any other way. By using an interpreter you can:

- Understand everything you are being told
- Be sure everything you say will be understood
- Ask questions and get answers
- Understand and agree to tests or treatment.

Many people don't want to use interpreters, especially for personal or sensitive health matters. You may be worried that the interpreter could be someone you know in your community or be a friend who doesn't know you have hepatitis C. Like all other health care professionals, interpreters **must** protect your confidentiality.

Avoid using people who aren't qualified interpreters, they may not realise the importance of maintaining your confidentiality, and are unlikely to be trained in interpreting information, especially medical information. You can have a friend or relative present during appointments for support. However, friends and relatives should not interpret for you.

Telephone interpreters are also available anywhere in Australia. A telephone link will be made between you, your health care professional and a qualified interpreter. This service is called TIS (Translating and Interpreting Service) and you can use it by calling 131 450. The service is free, and does not need to be booked in advance.

Social workers and counsellors

Having the support of friends, family and partners is important, but sometimes you may want to talk to someone who understands what it's like to have hepatitis C. Many services such as hepatitis organisations, hospitals and liver clinics have counsellors and social workers you can talk to about hepatitis C and your treatment.

Seeing a counsellor or social worker does not mean that you are not able to cope with your life. Instead, counselling provides you with an opportunity to talk about your feelings and find solutions to some of the challenges you may be facing. It is up to you to decide if you want counselling.

Your counsellor or social worker can:

- Help you find appropriate services
- Provide emotional support
- Help you decide who to tell about your diagnosis
- Go with you to some appointments
- Explain things you don't understand.

Dietician

Dietitians advise people on food and nutrition. They recommend diets for people's many different needs (eg. diabetes, weight reduction, weight gain, heart problems, allergies, eating disorders, high cholesterol), and this can be especially valuable to living well with hepatitis C.

Remember:

It is the health care professional's responsibility to give you information in a way that you can understand. If there is something you do not understand, ask for the information to be repeated or ask for an interpreter.

It is your responsibility to tell your doctor about any past or current health problems, as well as any medicines you are taking – this includes traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture, homeopathy, herbal therapies, vitamin and dietary supplements

If you are unable to keep an appointment let your health care professional, particularly your liver specialist, know as soon as possible.

4.3 Will having hepatitis C affect my immigration status?

Having hepatitis C should **not** affect your immigration status in Australia. However, all people applying for permanent residency are required to pass a health requirement. They include a HIV test and a chest x-ray. The laws and regulations about becoming a permanent resident are complex. It is important to get legal advice from a qualified Migration Agent rather than relying on family or friends.