

Uproar Over Hepatitis Outbreak in Armenia

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Government blamed after patients contracted the disease while undergoing routine operations.

Medical experts in Armenia have criticised the authorities for their handling of an outbreak of hepatitis C at a health centre in the city of Kajaran which has seen 15 people contract the virus.

Hepatitis C is commonly transmitted by blood transfusions or by unsafe medical procedures, particularly the use of unsterilised instruments. Early signs suggest that all 15 patients contracted the virus from contaminated instruments.

A total of 191 people underwent operations at the Kajaran health centre in 2014, so 15 infections represents nearly eight per cent. Dr Ara Asoyan, Armenia's chief epidemiologist, told IWPR that it was possible more people had contracted the virus.

"We are carrying out blood tests to find out who has been infected," he said.

One of those infected is Kajaran resident Marine Mkrtchyan, who had an appendectomy late last year.

"About 40 days after the operation, I became nauseous and started vomiting," she said. "I sought medical advice. At the Yerevan infectious diseases hospital I found out that I was infected."

In December, specialists at the National Centre for Disease Control and Prevention discovered that staff at the Kajaran hospital were using unsterilised surgical instruments, and found traces of the virus on some of them. They identified shortcomings in the sterilisation and disinfection of instruments right across the centre's departments, including the surgery, obstetrics and gynaecology.

The authorities in the Syunik region have launched a criminal investigation for breaches of health rules and safety standards. The medical centre is currently closed while the investigation is carried out. It will then be up to the Armenia's courts whether to revoke the centre's licence.

This is not the first time this has happened at the Kajaran health centre. Two years ago, major hygiene problems were reported at the centre when it opened a new wing. Things have not improved since then.

On January 22, Health Minister Armen Muradyan told journalists that the government would meet the costs of treating anyone infected with hepatitis C at the hospital.

"With modern medicine, hepatitis C is curable," he said. "This disease can be life-threatening only if it is diagnosed late or if it isn't treated properly. However, all doctors must be held accountable for mistakes and shortcomings, as any kind of infection can be fatal."

The 15 people with hepatitis C are now receiving treatment in hospitals in Kajaran, Kapan and Yerevan. Nine are being kept in and the rest are outpatients.

The drugs used to treat hepatitis C – Ribavirin and Pegylated Interferon – cost between 5,000 and 20,000 US dollars for the course that is required.

Despite the government's reassurances, those who have contracted the virus remain worried about meeting the costs of treatment.

Vahan Petrosyan contracted the disease after treatment for varicose veins. After hearing of other cases in the town, he went for a test and found out he had hepatitis C.

"I've already spent 300,000 drams [more than 600 dollars] on treatment of a disease I contracted through no fault of my own," he said. "I've paid for tests, medication, transportation costs to Yerevan, and I don't know who's going to compensate me for that."

In addition to free treatment, the authorities have promised to consider paying compensation. However, Deputy Health Minister Vahan Poghosyan told IWPR that the exact amount on offer would not be decided until after the authorities had completed their investigation.

Anahit Harutyunyan, who heads Positive People Armenian Network, an NGO that works on infectious diseases, said there was no national programme for dealing with hepatitis C. Her organisation has written to the health ministry with a proposal to develop a programme modelled on existing national systems for combating tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS.

Deputy Health Minister Poghosyan says health officials are drafting new procedural policies that will be soon be implemented on the ground.

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