

Inmates 'denied' hepatitis care: Libs

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By Henrietta Cook

ACT prisoners face inadequate health care with one-third of hepatitis C-infected inmates waiting for treatment, according to the Canberra Liberals.

On August 22, there were 33 prisoners in the Alexander Maconochie Centre waiting for assessment for a hepatitis C treatment program and eight prisoners waiting for admission into the program.

Health Minister Katy Gallagher revealed the figures in response to questions on notice from Liberal corrections spokesman Jeremy Hanson, who said the figures made a mockery of the proposed needle exchange program.

"The prisoners are being denied treatment because there are insufficient treatment places available," he said. "It seems the Government's approach is to push for a needle exchange program but what we would like to see is more hepatitis C treatment places available so that we can deal with the problem at hand, rather than wasting resources."

But Ms Gallagher said Mr Hanson was conflating transmission strategies with treatment.

"We have got to do both, there is no point treating everyone for hepatitis C and having no



DISPUTE: ACT Health Minister Katy Gallagher and Liberal corrections spokesman Jeremy Hanson.

prevention strategy", she said. "Everyone with hepatitis C in the jail who needs treatment and monitoring is getting it."

Health officials estimate that around two-thirds of the ACT's prison population have hepatitis C. However, the percentage of prisoners who consent to having their blood tested for the virus is much lower.

Hepatitis C causes liver inflammation, and can lead to cirrhosis, cancer and death.

Ms Gallagher said the prison's hepatitis C treatment program was not suitable for every-

"There are limited spots for people, and for the community. Not all people are suitable for the program, they may have the virus but not symptoms, or they may not want to do the program."

She said treating communicable diseases like hepatitis C in prison had a positive effect on the broader community.

"I think this is a positive story, prisoners have never been able to access the liver clinic until recently and now they have access to the treatment. If they can get rid of the virus from their system they can't transmit that virus to other people. They are not going to be incarcerated their whole life."

She said prisoners who finished their sentences could continue receiving treatment once they left jail.

Ms Gallagher said prisoners waiting for assessment into the treatment program had their liver function tested at periods between six and 12 months.

Prisoners who are not obese, and who have had the virus for between 15 to 20 years are prioritised for the treatment program.

Justice Richard Reifshaug will today chair a debate at the Australasian Sexual Health Conference in Canberra over a needle and syringe program in the ACT prison.