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S.F.'s 'Hep B Free' Campaign Launched

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By *BELINDA WONG*

In an unprecedented effort to eradicate hepatitis B, Mayor Gavin Newsom, Assemblywoman Fiona Ma and Supervisor Ed Jew introduced San Francisco's Hep B Free Campaign.

"This is the largest-ever health-care campaign targeting the Asian American community," Ted Fang, director of the Asian-Week Foundation, said at a press conference April 25 at New Asia Restaurant in Chinatown. "But it is really more than an Asian Pacific American community campaign. This is a health-care campaign for all of San Francisco."

This collaborative effort, which brings together community leaders with more than 50 health-care and API organizations, aims to spread its message of "B Sure, B Tested, B Free!" through increasing awareness and advocacy.

San Francisco's Asian Pacific Islander community carries a disproportionate burden of liver cancer and undetected infection, according to campaign research. The disease is responsible for 80 percent of all liver cancers among APIs, and can lead to premature death from liver cancer or liver failure, second only to smoking tobacco in causing the most cancer deaths in the world.

Assembly Bill 158 calls for San Francisco to implement a pilot program that will address HBV health education, prevention and treatment in a two-year campaign to screen and vaccinate all Asian Pacific Islander residents for hepatitis B.

According to Fang, the campaign will save thousands of lives and hundreds of millions of dollars for San Francisco's economy that would otherwise be spent on treating complications from liver disease caused by hepatitis B.



From left: Dr. Mitch Katz, director, San Francisco Public Health Department; Dr. Samuel So, director, Asian Liver Center, Stanford University; Assessor Phil Ting; Mayor Gavin Newsom; Supervisor Ed Jew; Ted Fang, director, AsianWeek Foundation.

Assessor Phil Ting described the disease as “the silent killer in our community,” noting that more than half of the 1.4 million people who are affected by hepatitis B are Asian Pacific American, and that one out of 10 people in the API community have an undiagnosed infection.

“This is a disease that could be perfectly preventable,” said Ting, stressing the importance of education in communities.

Newsom, who has committed to the campaign “both in a personal and financial way,” called it the most comprehensive initiative of its kind in the U.S.

“Because San Francisco lays claim to one of its proudest distinctions, having roughly 30-plus percent of its population of Asian descent, we have a special responsibility to raise awareness and to make sure people are aware of the fact that they may have hepatitis B,” he said.

But as Fang pointed out, preventing and treating the disease is more than just a policy issue, requiring real health-care commitment and real health-care expertise.

“We deal with so many issues that we cannot solve, so many issues that are too difficult to tackle,” said Dr. Mitch Katz, director of the San Francisco Public Health Department. “With hepatitis B we have a vaccine that can prevent this disease and is safe to use. This should be a priority for the health department.”

Dr. Samuel So, who founded the Asian Liver Center at Stanford University, acknowledged that although the goal of eradicating the disease is an ambitious campaign, it is greatly needed.

According to So, starting the campaign in San Francisco is especially appropriate because the city’s liver cancer rate is three times higher than the rest of the country.

“Our campaign in San Francisco is just months and years ahead of other cities in the U.S.,” said So. “We can really be a demonstration model for the rest of the country to follow.”

Accessible and free or low-cost screenings and vaccinations will be offered at physicians’ offices, health clinics, and street fairs. Information on testing, vaccinations and SF Hep B Free events is available at www.sfhepbfree.org.