

Hepatitis B Strikes Asian Populations Hard

By Alastair Bland

Less than one person in a thousand throughout the United States is infected with Hepatitis B. However, among the Asian-Pacific Islander population in San Francisco, more than one in 10 has the disease, and concern has escalated among the city's health experts, community leaders and government officials over the prevalence of the virus, which can lead to severe problems in the liver, cancer and death.

Ted Fang, director of the Asian Week Foundation, is currently helping to launch the Hep. B Free Campaign, a collaboration of doctors, hospitals, health centers and local politicians aimed at testing and vaccinating or treating every adult Asian resident of San Francisco.

"A lot of people are helping here and there, but we want to coordinate that into one concerted effort to create a safety net," Fang said.

Janet Zola, a health educator with the San Francisco Department of Public Health, reports that the frequency of Hepatitis B in the Asian-Pacific Islander sector of the city's residents can be attributed to immigrants who were never tested for the virus in their native countries.

"A Hep. B vaccine is required for entry into public schools in San Francisco, but that doesn't help with foreign-born adults," she said.

Hepatitis B is transmitted via blood-mixing, and the most common means of acquiring the virus are sexual activity and inheriting the disease at birth from an infected mother. Hepatitis B is 100 times more infectious than HIV, and after transmission the virus may reside dormant in the body for decades before attacking the liver. This has prompted the nickname "the silent killer," although damage to the body does occur during the virus' dormancy.

A vaccine is available, but the difficulty, according to Zola, lies in identifying those infected.

"We want to find these people and help them," she said. "This is exciting because it's something we can do something about. We have an excellent vaccine, good testing methods, good counseling and advice, and quality treatments."

The vaccine for Hepatitis B consists of three injections and is considered extremely effective. It has been used in half a billion cases around the world since its creation in the '80s, and the World Health Organization, impressed by its effectiveness and safety, has called it the "first anti-cancer vaccine."

Hepatitis B, after all, is the leading cause of liver cancer, a disease which kills Asian males in San Francisco at a rate faster than anywhere else in the nation.

Eighty-seven percent of the Asian-Pacific Islander population in San Francisco is estimated to have health insurance, according to Fang. The goal of the Hep B Free Campaign is to direct these people to their doctors for treatment, if necessary.

Meanwhile, the campaign's monetary funding and material resources will go largely toward testing and treating the remaining residents who have no coverage, many of whom are undocumented citizens and are not able to acquire health insurance

Last year, Fang assisted the Asian Liver Center in organizing and establishing a free Hepatitis B testing clinic at the annual Asian Heritage Street Celebration. A tent was erected and in five hours clinicians tested 536 people. Twelve percent tested positive for Hepatitis B.

Fang, seeing the interest among the community in getting tested and the obvious need for medical aid, was inspired to do more.

"It was clearly a crisis in the community, but with some level of hope. There is the problem, the interest and also the solution. Our goals are more ambitious than almost anyone can imagine, but in my life I've seen that you can make things happen if there's a will," Fang said.

Leaders of San Francisco's Asian community and those of the Hep. B Free Campaign held a press conference before the campaign's launch celebration at the New Asia Restaurant on April 25. Speakers addressed a small gathering on the challenges faced by the community and on the objectives of the project.

"We have to get the word out about this campaign," said Fang, who led the press conference. "We need to take steps to eradicate this silent killer from our community."

Mayor Gavin Newsom addressed the audience and pointed out that San Francisco today likely houses well over the 34-percent Asian population level recorded at the last census.

"We, as San Franciscans, have a special responsibility to raise awareness among people who have Hepatitis B, especially those who don't know it," Newsom said.

The Hep. B Free Campaign has received strong endorsement from Assemblywoman Fiona Ma, has received nationwide press coverage, and is currently being watched by

cities around the nation as a potential model for eliminating Hepatitis B from their communities as well, said Newsom.

"This campaign is the most comprehensive of its kind anywhere in America," he said.

Dr. Samuel So, a surgeon at Stanford's Asian Liver Center, said two-thirds of those with Hepatitis B in San Francisco do not know they carry the disease, yet he expressed confidence in combating the disease.

"We have a very ambitious goal: the global eradication of Hepatitis B. Get tested. Get vaccinated. We have to put a stop to this," So said.

On May 19, a free drop-in Hepatitis B testing clinic will again be available at the Asian Heritage Street Celebration, to be held this year at Fifth and Howard streets. All untested people are encouraged to visit.