

Hepatitis C and Me
Part II
Treatment and Cure

Cured.

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, goes the old adage. In my case, the pound of cure will cost the taxpayers of Massachusetts many thousands of dollars. Sadly, the Massachusetts Department of Correction has simply not addressed prevention.

On a warm Saturday afternoon, in the Acute Care Unit of the Lemuel Shattuck state hospital for the poor, [REDACTED] M.D., held my hand and told me I had Hepatitis C.¹ This diagnosis, in August 2014 roiled and motivated me to seek treatment within the confines of state prison. I felt instantly this diagnosis was essentially a death sentence. A long and painful road toward a liver transplant. A lost hope for sympathy and medication. I'm happy to report, my original assessment was wrong.

I reported then my chances for treatment is pitifully low. Without treatment my prison sentence has just become a life term.² What occurred when I returned to my prison, MCI-Shirley, a medium security correctional facility, was a labored effort to be one of the few inmates eligible for new expensive medication that would cure me. An effort which would pay off nearly three years after many grievances, letters to attorneys, blood tests, hospital visits, and various essential medical procedures.

I would learn that Hepatitis drug costs leave many without care.³ This silent epidemic was just beginning to gain political attention here in the Commonwealth by The Boston Globe, the Attorney General, prisoner's rights organizations like Prisoner Legal Services, among others. Still, with the wave of reform building, I was faced with a simple reality, "Any effort to try to treat the vast majority of patients is financially impossible."⁴

Charles Diorio

I would learn that Hepatitis C can be cured. Further, I would learn drugs like Sovaldi, and Harvoni can cost as much as \$1,000 a pill, with a treatment schedule of 12 to 16 weeks⁵. Fortunately, the Attorney General for Massachusetts, Maura Healey, attacked the problem through various means which included threats and legal action. She argued "[These] drug[s] [are] priced in a way that puts it out of reach of people who need it...companies are entitled to recover for their costs and are entitled to reap profits. But we need to make sure these drugs are available to people."⁶

Attorney General Healey argued companies like Gilead Sciences Inc., make a great deal of their money from Medicaid rebates, and therefore, she used state consumer protection laws as a crowbar to bring down prices for vulnerable patients like prisoners.⁷

Meanwhile, I faced a long uncertain road. I would routinely be called to the facility hospital for blood draws. I would be removed from the facility to Shattuck Hospital for ultra-sound, colonoscopies, and a liver biopsy. Each medical experience was dignified and professional. During every step in my process, the men and women of MCI-Shirley, and the maximum security prison Souza-Baranowski medical departments provided me the finest care I could hope for. During this period of care, I would learn, MassHealth would be obligated to pay for hepatitis C drugs for all infected members.⁸

The cost of new generation hepatitis C drugs, so called direct-acting antivirals, can range from \$54,600 to \$94,500 for a 12-week course of treatment.⁹ I would learn I would require 16 weeks.

As days and weeks turned into months and years, my body grew frail. Fatigue, jointpain, and cirrhosis gripped me. I look and feel 20 years older.

Charles N. Diorio

With all my praise for my medical care, I can only offer grievances and contempt for the Massachusetts Department of Corrections which ignores conditions promoting the cross contamination of this deadly disease.

Inmates with deadly infectious disease, like hepatitis C, are allowed to share cells. Inmates share razors, drugs, there is sex, and fights where cross contamination occur. Cells are rarely, if ever, decontaminated. There is no routine testing for infectious disease. Inmates with various contagious disease routinely work in the kitchen. In fact, knowing I had hepatitis C, I was cleared and permitted to work in the kitchen of both Souza-Baranowski C.C., and MCI-Shirley.

Prisoners ravaged with hepatitis C are forced to live among young and strong inmates who often take advantage of their weakened condition. Hepatitis C inmates easily fall victim to threats, fights, and extortion.

Treatment is often tied directly to positive programming, and disciplinary free living. Fights, drug use, tattooing, are just a few of the infractions which will end the opportunity for treatment and medication.¹⁰

The Massachusetts Department of Correction has created a toxic environment where deplorable conditions are taken for granted. Conditions that include contaminated cells, squalid conditions, and failure to segregate infected inmates from healthy ones.

While my future went from bleak to cure, I have only political, legal, and a media spotlight to thank. My infection may have gone untreated for years had I not been lucky enough to be diagnosed by doctors of Shattuck hospital. A visit which was unrelated and routine. A visit which found me admitted to the Acute Care Unit. Without these series of events, I may still be filing grievances, and hoping for a cure.

Charles N. Diorio

It is difficult to recall the names of all the medical staff I have encountered since my diagnosis. It is impossible to forget the many inmates I met still suffering with this affliction. They are easy to identify in these prisons. Look for prisoners gaunt, their pallid skin sagging around their necks, their eyes dull, yellowed, and lifeless. Look for the shuffling inmates who look sick - these are the victims of the silent epidemic.

My journey has come to an end. I will get my medication. Medication which will cost the taxpayers nearly \$50,000 dollars. I will remember the many nurses and doctors I visited, their eyes bright, and their hope real. I'll remember the many journeys to the Lemuel Shattuck hospital where I received the most sympathetic and professional care. All the while, I remained skeptical - until the day a wonderful nurse named Ashley handed me the physician's order - 16 weeks of Harvoni and a booster of Riboviran. I can expect a cure rate of %90 percent.

END

Charles N. Diorio W103769
Souza-Baranowski C.C.
P.O.Box 8000
Shirley, MA 01464

Hepatitis C and Me.

Part II
Treatment and Cure

NOTES

1. MCI-Shirley, Hepatitis C & Me, Diorio, Charles. Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, Volume 25(1), 2016.
2. IBID, Author note: I urge readers to visit www.JPP.org and read Part I of this essay. Part I begged a resolution to my condition, and ultimate fate. I'm happy to tell readers of my good news.
3. Hepatitis Drug Costs Leave Many Without Care, Freyer, Felice J. Boston Sunday Globe, April 10, 2016. "Hepatitis C is a big concern for government, because it disproportionately affects low-income people, who are more likely to be on Medicaid, and prisoners, whose care is also the state's responsibility."
4. Id. @ n.3
5. cf. n.3 AG Warns Maker on Hepatitis Drug Costs, Weisman, Robert. The Boston Globe. robert.weisman@globe.com.
6. AG Warns Maker on Hepatitis Drug Costs, Weisman, Robert. The Boston Globe. IBID
7. Firms Dismiss Drug-Price Outrage, Robbins, Rebecca; The Boston Globe rebecca.robbins@statnews.com
8. MassHealth to Pay for Hepatitis C Drugs For All Infected Members, Freyer, Felice J., The Boston Globe, June 30th 2016. "...acting administrators for the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, which notified Medicaid directors in November that the Law required Medicaid to cover the drugs."
9. Firms Dismiss Drug-Price Outrage, Robbins, Rebecca. StatNews.Com
cf: AG Warns Maker on Hepatitis Drug Costs, Weisman, Robert. The Boston Globe.
10. Author Note: On May 9th 2017, I was ordered to the medical unit of Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center. I was informed I would begin 16 weeks of Harvoni. Also, I was made to sign a form that indicated I would lose my eligibility should I receive a disciplinary report for, among other things, fighting and drug use. My medication would start May 22nd.
- 11.