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THINK B: UCSF Educates Community on Hepatitis B

By Charles Liao and Jason Hom

Hepatitis B is what some call the "silent killer." It is given such a notorious name because of its ability to lie dormant in the host body, waiting for the right opportunity to strike.

The disease is caused by the virus, Hepatitis B virus (HBV). HBV is spread through blood or body fluids and is not spread through food or water, sharing eating utensils, breastfeeding, hugging, kissing, coughing, sneezing or by casual contact. The virus specifically infiltrates the liver and can cause chronic infection, liver cirrhosis, liver cancer, liver failure and even death. According to the CDC, in 2003, an estimated 73,000 people in the United States are infected with HBV and 5000 infected people die per year.

From research studies, there appears to be no actual findings that suggest HBV discrimination between age groups and ethnic groups. It is surprising, however, that half of the infected individuals are self identified as belonging to the Asian Pacific Islander (API) category. However, there are no medications available to cure HBV infected individuals, only antiviral drugs to control the molecular activities that the virus induces. Fortunately, the Hepatitis B vaccine is available for prevention of HBV infection and is proven to be almost 100-percent effective.

Recognizing the severity of the Hepatitis B problem in the nation and specifically in San Francisco, where APIs account for 30 percent of the population, the University of California at San Francisco's Department of Family and Community Medicine and Asian Health Caucus, a student organization created a joint initiative. The initiative, San Francisco Hepatitis B Collaborative (SFHBC), established its mission to partner with community organizations to increase education, screening, and prevention against Hepatitis B within local Asian American and Pacific Islander communities.

Founded in 2004, SFHBC pursues its mission by: a) creating an instructional curriculum that includes seminars and procedural training; b) building an organizational committee infrastructure; c) operating a student-run mobile Hepatitis B clinic; d) forging sustainable partnerships with Bay Area community organizations that serve large numbers of AAPI clients; and e) engaging health professional students and faculty in community advocacy and service-learning. While SFHBC is primarily an educational outreach and advocacy initiative, it has a research focus to better understand the knowledge, practice and barriers to care pertaining to Hepatitis B among outreach participants.

On Saturday, October 15, SFHBC members partnered with the Chinatown Health Fair to provide Hepatitis B screening. UCSF students along with Chinatown community organizations created an educational atmosphere to educate local San Franciscans on their own health. The Hepatitis B clinic attracted roughly 85 individuals, who were given information from student educators on the importance of getting vaccinated against HBV and were also asked to donate blood for HBV screening. The blood test results will be mailed confidentially to these individuals and will include information on what steps to take thereafter.

The clinic was a great experience for all of the UCSF student volunteers. The clinic helped improve students' skill level in phlebotomy and medical language ability in Cantonese or Mandarin. Additionally, the experience reinforced the reasons many chose to become healthcare providers. Doris Wang, a second year medical student, summarizes the experience best: "Helping out at the Chinatown Health Fair was a very rewarding experience. I was surprised by people's preconceptions, lack of adequate education, and minimal screening for Hepatitis B. But their receptive and appreciative attitudes towards our efforts definitely made the event meaningful and fun."

Building upon its successful participation in the Chinatown Health Fair, the SFHBC plans to conduct HBV screening at the upcoming Japantown Health Fair on November 5. The SFHBC also plans to hold an event at UCSF on November 10, providing education for health care providers about the HBV, diagnostic strategies, and treatment options. This event will help educate providers who work in a community marked by an increased incidence of HBV.

Other upcoming events will complement the efforts of the SFHBC to combat HBV. The American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases (AASLD) and the American Liver Foundation (ALF) are issuing a call to action against liver disease, particularly Hepatitis B. Related to this, on November 10 at the Chinese Hospital in San Francisco, AASLD will host a press conference, and ALF will launch its Think B Hepatitis B screening

and education program.

Ultimately, UCSF students and staff are making an important impact in the community while also learning and honing their own skills. By donating their time and knowledge, they are helping to fight a devastating disease which is both preventable and treatable. Taking things one step further, the UCSF SFHBC team is considering the creation of a permanent clinic dedicated to screening, vaccinating, and serving those populations of the Bay Area most susceptible to HBV. Such a clinic, which would be analogous to successful HIV clinics also started by members of the UCSF community, would deliver services in a manner not possible with efforts restricted to temporary "mini-clinics" at health fairs.

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