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For immediate release

### **New scanner streamlines hospital service for Hepatitis C patients**

A new portable high-tech scanner at Waitemata DHB is making life easier for Hepatitis C patients – removing the need to travel elsewhere for the procedure and helping put them on the path to 12 weeks of treatment with a 97% cure rate.

FibroScan technology is used to work out how much liver scarring (fibrosis) is present after the initial diagnosis is made through a blood test.

Results gives physicians a better idea of how damaged the liver may be, what treatment will work best and whether ongoing monitoring will be needed to pick up on potential developments – including cirrhosis and cancer.

The scan is quick, painless and 100 per cent risk-free.

It can also be used to assess other types of liver disease – minimising the need for invasive liver biopsies.

Waitemata DHB patients once travelled to Auckland City Hospital for the procedure after being referred by a clinician.

A follow-up consultation back at Waitakere or North Shore hospitals determined a course of treatment and the entire process could take a number of months.

“Now all of this can be done in just one visit,” gastroenterologist and hepatology lead Dr John Perry says. “You get the results straight away and a treatment can often be prescribed on the spot.”

“It saves a lot of double visits and is a lot less stressful for people.”

An estimated 8000 people living in the DHB catchment are thought to have chronic Hepatitis C. Around 5000 are undiagnosed.

The disease once had a high mortality rate but modern, vastly-improved treatment means a cure is now 97% likely after 12 weeks of treatment.

Hepatitis C may be associated with past needle exposure and Dr Perry says this means some patients are less likely to visit a hospital.

“There is definitely a stigma attached to Hepatitis C – and the stigma stops people seeking treatment,” he says. “Ninety per cent of New Zealand-born patients will have got it through drug use – previous or current. They, as a group, are less trusting of the medical profession and less likely to engage - particularly with hospitals.”

But the FibroScan equipment is portable so staff are able to take it to the patients instead.

“Now we can take the scanner to them. They might, for instance, go for counselling to a community outreach clinic where we are able to offer this service on a particular day. Anything we can do to make things easier and improve attendance rates is going to make a difference.”

FibroScan will also be used by Clinical Nurse Specialists who run clinics in prisons. Dr Perry hopes its availability at Waitemata DHB will encourage more people to come forward and get themselves tested.

“Hepatitis C makes people feel miserable,” he says. “It causes fatigue and means you’re less productive. But it is a curable disease now and you can totally sort it out. We want people to come forward; we want them to get tested.”

**Caption:** l-r. Hepatology clinical nurse specialists Lieske Regtien and Chris Hayes with Consultant Dr John Perry.

**Ends**

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