

Experience of a Frontline Provider

Lynn K. Bradley, PA-C
Atlanta VA Medical Center



I work in the Liver Clinic at the Atlanta VA Medical Center, where we have treated over one hundred veterans with hepatitis C. In my years working for the VA and caring for veterans in mental health and substance abuse programs as well as in the Liver Clinic, I've experienced many of the challenges as well as the rewards of working in the VA setting.

Helping patients understand hepatitis C

One of the biggest challenges is the need to help veterans who have hepatitis C understand what this means for them. The patients I talk to are often frustrated and worried when things don't happen as quickly as they would like. I feel it's really important for patients to know that hepatitis C is not a condition that progresses quickly – in fact the natural course of the disease is one of decades rather than days or weeks. While we try hard to make sure that patients are seen in the Liver Clinic promptly and that the workup proceeds without delay, the most important thing is to come to the right decision with the patient about the most appropriate treatment.

I think it's also very important for patients who are considering antiviral therapy to know what to expect. The time invested in talking to them about the treatment, its side effects, and how they will be monitored during treatment pays off in the long run. When patients have a good understanding beforehand, they're much better able to deal with side effects and to complete therapy with a successful result.

Dealing with other medical conditions

It's not possible to treat hepatitis C in a vacuum, ignoring all of a patient's other medical conditions. For instance, antiviral treatment can create problems for people who have heart disease. Many of the patients we see have significant risk factors for coronary artery disease and may even have symptoms, but have never had a complete evaluation for this. I often order stress tests for patients as part of the workup for hepatitis treatment. One recent patient actually needed to have bypass surgery before we could consider treating his hepatitis C. It doesn't always feel like the work of a liver specialist, but paying attention to the whole patient is part of being a good medical care professional.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is another condition we see frequently in our hepatitis C patients. The side effects of interferon and the anxiety associated with treatment can have a big impact on these patients. In addition to seeing them frequently in clinic and providing reassurance and support, we also work closely with the mental health team to help these patients get through their treatment successfully.

The large numbers of patients with hepatitis C

A challenge we constantly face is the large numbers of patients with hepatitis C. One of the things we have done to deal with this is to use group education sessions so that one medical professional can work with a group of patient simultaneously to provide information and answer questions. We are also beginning to use the Hepatitis C Case Registry to keep track of the patients with hepatitis C at our facility and to make sure they are getting the appropriate medical evaluation.

Paying close attention to each patient

One of the things I think we do really well is to provide each veteran patient with a lot of personal attention. Compared to what I see in private medical care settings, I think our patients are better informed, more closely monitored, and offered more support services to help them deal with hepatitis C. This is one of the things I really like about working in the VA system. We have a very dedicated staff of people who are really committed to providing the best for our patients. It's not always easy, and we're not always successful, but we certainly try hard!

