

Egypt, once top Hep C sufferer, draws cure seekers

September 10 2017



Electron micrographs of hepatitis C virus purified from cell culture. Scale bar is 50 nanometers. Credit: Center for the Study of Hepatitis C, The Rockefeller University.

Like millions in Egypt, Ahmed Nada suffered silently from Hepatitis C. But the country is turning from the world's most afflicted by the disease to a global destination for those seeking a cure.

Nada, 31, only learned that he carried the virus when he tried to donate blood.

"At first I was very angry," he said. "I kept thinking whether it was from my previous work as a dentist, or from the barber or from what? I didn't know."

Previously, a Hepatitis C infection, even when diagnosed, would have gone untreated or simply been managed.

But a cheap new drug produced in Egypt since 2015 and a government programme to eliminate the condition meant Nada could be easily cured.

He registered on a government website and was directed to the nearest [treatment](#) centre.

Now cured along with more than 1.3 million other Egyptians, Nada says the entire process was simple "from the moment I filled in the application".

Egypt has the highest prevalence of Hepatitis C infection in the world, an epidemic that started with a government programme for mass vaccinations with unsterilised syringes in the 1950s.

Seven percent of people aged between 15 and 59 have an active infection, according to Egypt's 2015 Demographics and Health Surveys.

40,000 deaths a year

The blood-borne virus can cause serious damage to the liver before being detected, and can be fatal.

About 20 percent of those who become infected get better without

treatment, but the rest can remain infected for up to 30 years without showing symptoms.

"Just about every family in Egypt is touched by Hepatitis C," World Health Organization official Dr Henk Bekedam wrote in a 2014 report on the disease, which the agency said was killing about 40,000 Egyptians a year.

Since 2006, Egypt has carried out surveys to determine the epidemic's spread and negotiated cheaper drugs from abroad.

However, its first breakthrough came when the US-based Gilead Sciences pharmaceutical company developed Sovaldi, a [cure](#) approved by the US Food and Drug Administration in 2013.

Egypt negotiated a deal to reduce the price of a course of treatment from \$84,000 (70,000 euros), or \$1,000 a pill, to a fraction of that.

The National Committee for Control of Viral Hepatitis set up a website so sufferers could access the drug.

"The first day we had 100,000 [patients](#), the second day 100,000 patients registered, and the following week 50,000 patients daily," said Manal Hamdy el-Sayed, a founding member of the committee running the programme.

No more waiting lists

"People were waiting impatiently," she said.

The next breakthrough came in 2015 when Egypt began to manufacture the drug locally, reducing the price for the full course to just \$83, the committee's executive director Kadry al-Saeed said.

Waiting lists for the cure ended in July 2016, and the government is now searching for an estimated three million Egyptians who carry the virus without knowing it, Saeed said.

Now an Egyptian company has capitalised on the low cost of the cure locally to attract patients from abroad, where the drug is seen as exorbitantly priced.

Tour N' Cure treats visiting patients for about eight percent of the treatment's cost abroad.

"We treat patients in almost all countries," said Mostafa el-Sayed, the campaign's managing director.

The company says \$7,000 covers flights, a week's accommodation, blood tests and treatment—and five days of tourism in Egypt.

Patients return home with the remainder of the medicine while Egyptian doctors follow up with them.

Mirel Damboiu, 59, from Romania, heard about the treatment through his daughter and son-in-law.

"The treatment was successful from the first five days," said Damboiu.

"In Romania this treatment is not available to buy," while another treatment available there would have been "very invasive", he said.

Damboiu will have his final round of treatment in September before undergoing final tests.

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Citation: Egypt, once top Hep C sufferer, draws cure seekers (2017, September 10) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-09-egypt-hep-seekers.html>

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