

CAMPBELL RIVER MIRROR

Councillors accept hepatitis challenge

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Campbell River politicians are being asked to roll up their sleeves in a challenge against their Courtenay counterparts.

Leanne Wingert of AIDS Vancouver Island challenged city councillors at their Monday meeting to step up and best Courtenay councillors in getting tested for hepatitis C.

The testing takes place on Tuesday, July 28 to coincide with World Hepatitis Day, which aims to bring awareness of the disease and erase the stigma associated with the condition.

Wingert said hepatitis means inflammation of the liver which can be caused by illness, alcohol abuse, or other medical conditions.

There are three different strains of hepatitis – A, B, and C.

Hepatitis C can be especially dangerous because of the severe damage the disease can do to the liver – some people will require a liver transplant – but symptoms can be managed through treatment, Wingert said.

Anyone can get hepatitis C, Wingert said, but it's believed that the majority of people with the disease are baby boomers.

“At least 220,000 Canadians live with chronic hepatitis C and about 75 per cent of affected people are baby boomers (those born between 1945 and 1970),” Wingert told council. “And at least 44 per cent of them don't know they have it.”

Wingert said that's because the disease lays dormant for years after a person has contracted hepatitis C. Most people don't start to notice the symptoms until their liver is already damaged, which can take 20 years or more. Wingert said the only way to know for sure that you have the disease is to be tested.

Coun. Ron Kerr, Coun. Colleen Evans and Mayor Andy Adams committed to take the test on July 28 at the AIDS Vancouver Island office while Coun. Michele Babchuk asked if she could take part another day.

“I'm totalling willing to roll up my sleeve, I'm just not available on July 28,” she said. “But we certainly want to throw down the gauntlet to prove that we're better than Courtenay anytime we can.”

Wingert said she could certainly accommodate that.

“If you call me, I can arrange to have you poked – I mean tested,” Wingert said.

Coun. Charlie Cornfield said he would also be away and asked Wingert to book him in, as well.

Hepatitis C is caused by a virus attacking the liver.

It’s spread by coming in contact with infected blood and items such as non-sterile needles.

Jeanette Reinhardt, health promotion educator with AIDS Vancouver Island, said it may be that the majority of people with hepatitis C are baby boomers because modern procedures to prevent blood exposure only started in the 1980s.

“Wide-spread screening of our blood supplies was not adopted until 1992,” Reinhardt wrote in a letter to city council. “This means that some baby boomers may have been exposed to infected blood during transfusions and medical procedures. Others may have been infected through unsterile piercings or tattoos, or from injecting drugs, even if they only did it once in the past.”

And because the symptoms take so long to appear, people can spread hepatitis C to others without knowing it.

“A simple, free blood test can show whether or not you have the virus,” Reinhardt wrote. “Getting tested and treated early can prevent or slow down liver damage, and can even cure the infection. New treatments are available that make treatment shorter than it used to be and with very high cure rates.”

Testing is also available to the public on July 28 at the AIDS Vancouver office (1371 Cedar St.) as well as every Wednesday when a nurse practitioner comes into the office.

Testing can also be done at the public health building at the back of Tyee Plaza.