

Treating substance use and hep C through telemedicine

The Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute in Washington, D.C., has awarded \$7 million to the University at Buffalo for a study that is integrating the treatment of substance abuse with the treatment of the hepatitis C virus. The goal of the study is to achieve better patient outcomes through telemedicine.

Seven opioid-treatment programs at 12 locations across the state are participating in the study. All are members of the Coalition of Medication-Assisted Treatment Providers and Advocates of New York State, or COMPA.

"About five years ago I realized that one of the major problems with treatment for hepatitis C is that its highest prevalence and increasing incidence occurs among people who inject drugs," said Dr. Andrew Talal, professor of medicine at the Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences at the University at Buffalo and a physician with UBMD Internal Medicine. He leads the study. "These people congregate in drug-treatment programs and frequently don't go to off-site specialists when referred."

Because opioid-treatment programs specialize in addiction and often don't have the expertise to treat hepatitis C, telemedicine is a way to link the two, he said.

The study will use telemedicine to manage the health of people with hepatitis C in combination with medications used to reduce opioid cravings. It will then examine how those patients fare compared with people who manage their hepatitis C through typical outpatient care. Individuals in opioid-treatment programs who are screened and test positive for hepatitis C will be asked for consent to participate in the study, with the goal of transitioning all participants to the integrated telemedicine approach. Participants will connect with and be monitored by liver specialists via telemedicine in their opioid-treatment programs and have hepatitis C medications ordered electronically and dispensed along with their medications.

"The study is being done in order to provide the evidence for this to become something that is referred to as standard of care," Talal said. It's [based on pilot results](#) published in the journal *Clinical Infectious Diseases* that show the approach is effective.

Enrollment in the study is expected to reach more than 600 participants, and the PCORI award is for five years. The participating programs are the Drug Abuse and Research Treatment Program in Buffalo, Start Treatment & Recovery Centers in Brooklyn, Mount Sinai Beth Israel in Manhattan and Brooklyn, Cornerstone Family Healthcare in Newburgh, Crouse Hospital in Syracuse, Pathways in Rochester and Buffalo, and the Strong Recovery/Addiction Psychiatry Division at the University of Rochester Medical.

"I think the implications are really tremendous," said Allegra Schorr, president of COMPA. Health care providers lose too many treatment opportunities if patients have to go somewhere else, she said.

Hepatitis C kills tens of thousands of people in the U.S. each year, and liver-related deaths and liver cancer are expected to increase significantly in the next decade, according to the most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, COMPA noted.

If successful, the integrative telemedicine approach could be applied to the treatment of other diseases, such as HIV, Schorr said.

"It's a very important study," she said, "and I'm very happy to see that so many of our members understand it and are willing to take part in it."