

editorial


Hepatitis C and the University of Puerto Rico

In the late seventies, clinicians began observing a group of patients with a puzzling combination of manifestations that included a susceptibility to opportunistic infections and a dysfunction of the immune system. After many other observations and landmark research, the virus of human immunodeficiency (HIV) was discovered. Since then, progress in the modulation of this disease has led to the point that treated patients are surviving beyond a significant number of years, converting this disease from a lethal to a chronic one. However, even with all these advances the world-wide epidemic continues to progress. Unlike ebola virus, which presents with a fulminant but self-contained epidemic course, the sub-acute spread of HIV has been the one characteristic that promotes the propagation of the disease.

In 1989, the hepatitis C virus (HCV) was described and by the 1990s, it became obvious that hepatitis C infection had become endemic in the world. As with HIV, its sub acute epidemic spread has been one its true avenues of sustained infection, many times superimposed to other infections associated to high-risk behaviors. The long-term complications, including hepatic failure and neoplasm, are rapidly becoming too frequent. Puerto Rico has been one of the targets of this infection and epidemiological studies clearly support this impression. As it occurred with HIV in the past, we are only just beginning to experience the clinical and socioeconomic impact of this condition. The projected burden of disease caused by HCV in 20 years will severely tax our health resources.

We are at a crucial moment that calls for a strategic and systematic scientific effort to better understand and control this disease. The scientific community in Puerto Rico has a critical role to play, not only for our growing number of patients, but for all populations affected in the world. The research community of the University of Puerto Rico Medical Sciences Campus has recognized this priority and a multidisciplinary group of investigators has united in this effort. Important clinical and epidemiological data is being collected and clinical trials have already begun. These efforts have to be followed by investigations in the immunological and pathophysiological aspects of the disease. As in HIV, research in preventive strategies, prevention of complications, drug discovery and delivery, patterns of genetic susceptibility, new animal models and vaccine research are among the many areas where our researchers must play a leading role.

This issue of the *Puerto Rico Health Sciences Journal* presents some of the work accomplished by our investigators. We hope it serves as a stimulus for other scientists to join in the search for the control and cure of this disease.



JOSE R. CARLO-IZQUIERDO, MD
*Chancellor Medical Sciences Campus
University of Puerto Rico
San Juan, Puerto Rico*