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## **Making headway against hepatitis C: SLU study shows new drug combo effective in non-responders**

*Second SLU study presented today shows liver damage can be reversed*

ST. LOUIS -- Saint Louis University Liver Center scientists are presenting research today on a more effective way to treat hepatitis C patients who have been unresponsive to current drug therapies.

They have shown that a cocktail of ribavirin and Infergen, a highly potent Interferon, is nearly twice as effective at controlling hepatitis C than standard treatments.

They are sharing their findings at the annual American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases meeting in Boston.

"The results are promising," says Bruce R. Bacon, M.D., principal investigator and director of the division of gastroenterology and hepatology at Saint Louis University School of Medicine. "This group of non-responders is a very challenging population to treat, and we found that patients who followed through with the therapy had a response nearly twice that of previous trials looking at this population."

Saint Louis University Liver Center researchers led a study of more than 500 patients with hepatitis C at 40 sites, 77 percent of whom had advanced fibrosis. Fourteen percent of patients taking 9mcg of Infergen daily and 20 percent taking 15 mcg were virus negative after six months.

A quarter of the non-cirrhotic patients receiving Infergen were also virus negative after 24 weeks. The optimal response to antiviral therapy is for the hepatitis C viral RNA to become undetectable on treatment and to remain undetectable for at least another six months off therapy; this is referred to as a sustained virologic response, essentially a cure of the disease. Rates of sustained virologic response are still to be determined in this ongoing study.

Infergen is a highly potent type of interferon currently used for adult patients with chronic hepatitis C three times a week, Bacon says. This trial is expected to be completed in 2007.

An estimated 3.9 million Americans have hepatitis C. About 250,000 who have been offered therapy are unresponsive to current drug therapies, and the number is growing by 50,000 annually, according to the CDC.

#### Second Study Shows Liver Damage Can Be Reversed

In another study being presented at the AASLD conference, SLU researchers found that liver damage may be able to be reversed in patients with chronic hepatitis C who have undergone successful therapy.

"They are not only at a very low risk for relapse but may also see improvements to their liver," says lead author Adrian Di Bisceglie, M.D., professor in the division of gastroenterology and hepatology at Saint Louis University School of Medicine.

Researchers studied the long-term effects in 150 patients with chronic hepatitis C following therapy. The level of liver damage in 79 percent of patients with stage 2 or worse fibrosis greatly improved and was unchanged in the rest of the patients.

"Little is known about how these patients fare after their treatment," says Di Bisceglie, M.D., also acting chair of the department of internal medicine at SLU. "This is the largest study of its kind to examine just how much improvement patients with hepatitis C have five years after a sustained virologic response, and the results are very encouraging."

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Established in 1836, Saint Louis University School of Medicine has the distinction of awarding the first M.D. degree west of the Mississippi River. Saint Louis University School of Medicine is a pioneer in geriatric medicine, organ transplantation, chronic disease prevention, cardiovascular disease, neurosciences and vaccine research, among others. The School of Medicine trains physicians and biomedical scientists, conducts medical research, and provides health services on a local, national and international level.

(Editor's Note: To arrange an interview with either Dr. Bacon or Dr. Di Bisceglie, who are attending the AASLD conference in Boston, contact Rachel Otto.)

