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From the Editor

VIRAL HEPATITIS, both in its acute and chronic form, has evolved into a national and worldwide public health concern. According to recent statistics, as many as 1.25 million people in the United States (US) are infected with hepatitis B, and nearly 4 million test positive for hepatitis C.¹ In the US alone, 700,000 new cases of acute viral hepatitis are reported annually. The disease burden for viral hepatitis is significant. Nearly 300 deaths per year are attributed to fulminant acute disease, and an estimated 15,000 persons succumb each year to chronic infection as a result of chronic liver disease. In fact, viral hepatitis is the leading cause of chronic liver disease, cirrhosis, and hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) worldwide, and is the principal reason for liver transplantation in adults.

In the last decade, concerns regarding the clinical and economic impact of hepatitis C virus (HCV) are growing. It is estimated that between 8,000 and 10,000 people infected with HCV die each year. In the absence of effective intervention, hepatitis C deaths are expected to nearly triple, to over 22,000 annually, within the next 10 years.² Despite recent advances in treating HCV, less than 50% of patients completing a full course of treatment achieve durable response. Additionally, only the minority of patients with chronic hepatitis C are referred for appropriate treatment or are candi-

dates for interferon-based therapy. With no definitive treatment for hepatitis C, and considering the fact that from 1989 to 1998 the median waiting time for a liver transplant increased from approximately 40 days to 506 days,³ measures for slowing the development of cirrhosis and liver failure are vital.

To address this growing health concern, a steering committee consisting of generalists and of specialists in Gastroenterology, Infectious Disease, and Clinical Virology developed a guide to assist clinicians in preventing, diagnosing, and managing viral hepatitis. This guide was peer reviewed by an expert panel and updated for 2000 to include new information on emerging hepatotropic viruses and new therapies for viral hepatitis.

This guide provides an easy-to-use algorithmic approach to the diagnosis and treatment of viral hepatitis as well as the most in-depth and updated information on the epidemiology, diagnosis, and treatment of viral hepatitis. Special sections have been devoted to the issues of viral hepatitis in transplant, immunosuppressed, and pediatric populations. The ultimate goal of this guide is to provide easily accessible information to both primary care and specialty physicians involved in the care of patients with viral hepatitis.

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