

# Staying vigilant in battles with viral hepatitis strains

**Jantjie Taljaard**

IT IS crucial that vaccination becomes readily available to the majority of South Africans, especially high risk individuals. Viral hepatitis – a group of infectious diseases known as hepatitis A, B, C, D, and E which cause inflammation of the liver usually resulting in jaundice – is a growing concern worldwide.

Hepatitis B (HBV), in particular, seems to be wreaking havoc. It is estimated more than 780 000 people die every year due to complications of HBV which is second only to tobacco as the leading cause of cancer.

Hepatitis B is transmitted in the same way as HIV i.e. from person to person via contact with the blood or bodily fluids of a person infected with HBV. However, compared to HIV, it is 50-100 times more transmissible.

Hepatitis B prevalence is highest in sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia, where between 5–10 percent of adult populations is chronically infected.

In sub-Saharan countries, infants and young children are most at risk because transmission occurs mainly

from mother to child during birth (perinatal transmission) or during early childhood (child-to-child), most probably through weeping sores, cuts, bites, scrapes and scratches.

Unvaccinated adolescents and young adults are also at increased risk due to unprotected sexual exposure. It is estimated that over 50 percent of South Africans have been infected by the virus and at least three million people are chronic hepatitis B carriers. Chronic HBV is responsible for more than 75 percent of liver cancer cases among African men and women.

Liver cancer is the second most common cause of cancer in African men and third most common cause of cancer in African women.

Hepatitis B is much more difficult to cure. In general, the aim of treatment is to keep the infection under control and prevent the complications of cirrhosis and cancer.

● *Yesterday was World Hepatitis Day. Dr Jantjie Taljaard heads the Division for Infectious Diseases in the Department of Medicine at Stellenbosch University.*