

## **New Hope for Hepatitis B Sufferers**

Until now, there was only a slim chance that hepatitis B patients could be cured of their disease. So far, lamivudine has been the most commonly used therapy for hepatitis B. But it has clear limitations. About 14%-25% of patients treated with lamivudine develop resistance to the drug within one to two years of therapy. Also, most patients treated with lamivudine are required to continue therapy indefinitely.

A phase III study conducted in 13 European countries has shown that peginterferon alfa-2a is more effective than lamivudine in those with the most treatment-resistant disease. This is the largest multinational study of pegylated interferon in patients with 'variant' hepatitis B. Researchers plan to file Pegasys as a treatment for hepatitis B with health authorities by end of 2004 or early 2005.

Apart from peginterferon alfa-2a, studies also showed that Telbivudine, another new medicine, also achieved significantly better suppression of hepatitis B virus than lamivudine monotherapy. Of patients on Telbivudine monotherapy, 86 percent achieved normalized ALT (a measure of liver disease) levels, compared to 63 percent on lamivudine monotherapy. It is expected that Telbivudine would be on the market in two to three years' time.

Currently, there are 350 million people in the world having chronic infection with high prevalence particularly throughout Asia. The disease could be easily transmitted by blood-to-blood contact, during birth and sex. Infection by hepatitis B is extremely common in Hong Kong, about one-tenth of the population are carrier of hepatitis B virus.