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Free and Low-Cost Hepatitis A & Hepatitis B Vaccine Available

Hep Team Summer Health Program Targets MSM

San Francisco, CA—*Hep Team San Francisco* arrives in the Castro on **Tuesday, June 5, 2007** at the San Francisco LGBT Center, 1800 Market St, at **11:30 a.m.**, just in time to urge gay and bisexual men in San Francisco to get vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B. *Hep Team San Francisco* is a cooperative program among healthcare agencies including the San Francisco Department of Public Health, Magnet Health Services, and the API Wellness Center.

Hep Team San Francisco's public information campaign will include outreach workers, brochures, cards, print and on-line ads and a website at www.HepTeamSF.com. Free vaccinations will be offered at SF Pride 2007, the Folsom Street Fair, Up Your Alley and the Castro Street Fair and free or low-cost vaccinations will be offered at clinics throughout the city throughout the summer. More information is available on the website.

City health officials estimate that nearly half of all high-risk gay and bisexual men who are identified by the CDC as men who have sex with other men (MSM) are not vaccinated against hepatitis A or hepatitis B. The MSM community is disproportionately at high risk for these vaccine-preventable diseases compared to other groups.

"Getting vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B is an important part of maintaining good health and preventing illness," said Dr. Mitch Katz, Director of Health. "We want to educate the community and we want to make it easy for individuals to get the vaccine. Hep Team San Francisco is going to help us achieve those goals."

Hepatitis A and hepatitis B viruses cause serious liver diseases for which MSMs are at high risk. Hepatitis B is 100 times more contagious than HIV. Condoms, while vital for protecting against HIV and other STD's, may not protect against hepatitis A because it is transmitted through fecal-oral contact. Both hepatitis A and hepatitis B can cause serious illness that may last for months. Hepatitis B can also become chronic (lifelong) with increased risk of liver damage and liver cancer. Chronic carriers can continue to be infectious to others. Hepatitis C is not vaccine preventable.

"Magnet is happy to participate with the Hep Team San Francisco to help make sure that gay and bisexual men get vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B," said Steve Gibson, Director of Magnet Health Services. "Getting vaccinated is easy and a way for gay and bisexual men to take care of their health and the health of their partners."

June 1, 2007

Page 2

Nationwide, the CDC showed that as of 2004, only 45 % of high-risk adults have received any doses of vaccine against hepatitis B, despite the fact that the vaccine has been available for over 20 years. Patients without healthcare insurance or a regular healthcare provider lag behind in vaccination, as do gay and bisexual men who have not discussed their sexual histories with their providers.

There are multiple options for vaccination against hepatitis A and hepatitis B. An individual vaccine against hepatitis A (two shots over a 6-to-12 or 6-to-18 month period); an individual vaccine against hepatitis B (three shots over a 6 month period); and a combination vaccine against both hepatitis A and hepatitis B (three shots over a 6 month period). A complete series is necessary for long-term protection. However, once started, it is never too late to complete the vaccine series.

The Hep Team program was launched in Chicago in 2005 and expanded to Los Angeles, New York and Atlanta in 2006. In 2006, over 2000 doses of vaccine were administered at community-based events around the country, and surveys showed an increase in awareness of hepatitis A and hepatitis B and in intent to seek vaccination.

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