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Review Article

The Systemic Burden of Chronic Hepatitis C: A Comprehensive Review of Hepatic and Extrahepatic Complications in the Era of Direct-Acting Antivirals

Chandan A Patil[1]*, Lohith Potnuri[1], Preethi Siddharaju[1], Puneet Kumar Maheshwari[1], Om Praksh Manu[1], Mamatkulova Nazgul Mamatkulovna[1]

[1]PhD, Teacher of Public Health Department, Nagaon Medical College, Assam

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***Corresponding author:** Chandan A Patil
PhD, Teacher of Public Health Department, Nagaon Medical College, Assam

Abstract

A defining and perilous characteristic of chronic HCV infection is its insidious, often asymptomatic nature. Many infected individuals, including a significant proportion of those who progress to advanced liver scarring, remain unaware of their condition for decades.[1] Symptoms, when they do appear, are frequently nonspecific and mild, such as fatigue, malaise, or intermittent joint pain, further masking the underlying pathology.[2] This prolonged asymptomatic period creates a vast, underdiagnosed reservoir of patients who are not only capable of transmitting the virus but are also silently progressing toward severe, life-altering complications. The combination of a high rate of chronicity with a decades-long silent phase constitutes a public health crisis in disguise. By the time a diagnosis is made, often incidentally or upon the onset of severe symptoms, many patients have already developed advanced liver disease or established extrahepatic complications, rendering their management more complex and significantly increasing the burden on healthcare systems.[1] This clinical reality underscores the critical importance of routine screening for individuals in high-risk groups to facilitate early diagnosis.

Keywords: Hepatitis C Virus (HCV), Hepatic Complications, Extrahepatic Manifestations, Cirrhosis, Hepatocellular Carcinoma (HCC), Mixed Cryoglobulinemia, Direct-Acting Antivirals (DAA), Sustained Virologic Response (SVR), Liver Fibrosis, Systemic Disease.

I. Shifting the Paradigm from a Liver-Centric to a Systemic View

Historically, Hepatitis C has been viewed primarily through the lens of its effects on the liver. However, a growing body of evidence compels a paradigm shift, redefining chronic HCV infection not as a localized hepatic ailment but as a systemic disease with profound and multifaceted consequences. [10] The virus's capacity to replicate within lymphoid tissue (lymphotropism) in addition to liver cells (hepatotropism) is a key factor in its systemic reach.[12] The persistent presence of the virus drives a state of chronic inflammation and complex immune dysregulation that extends far beyond the liver, impacting a diverse array of organ systems.[14]

This systemic pathological burden manifests as a wide spectrum of extrahepatic manifestations (EHMs), which can affect the renal, dermatologic, hematologic, metabolic, and neurologic systems.[3] In some cases, an EHM may be the first clinical sign of an underlying HCV infection, presenting a diagnostic challenge for clinicians unfamiliar with this systemic perspective.[13] The purpose of this comprehensive review is to synthesize the current, evidence-based understanding of the full spectrum of HCV-related complications, both hepatic and extrahepatic. It will delve into the intricate pathophysiological mechanisms that drive this multisystem disease and critically analyze the transformative, yet at times incomplete, impact of modern curative therapies with direct-acting antivirals (DAAs). Understanding HCV as a systemic disease is essential for accurate diagnosis, comprehensive patient management, and appreciating the full clinical benefit of viral eradication.

II. The Hepatic Trajectory: From Chronic Inflammation to End-Stage Liver Disease

The most well-characterized consequence of chronic HCV infection is the progressive and often relentless damage inflicted upon the liver. This journey from persistent inflammation to end-stage liver disease is a multi-decade process, culminating in cirrhosis, liver failure, and hepatocellular carcinoma for a significant minority of patients.

A. The Pathogenesis of Liver Fibrosis: A Wound-Healing Response Gone Awry

The fundamental mechanism of liver injury in chronic HCV infection is not a direct, virus-induced killing of hepatocytes. Instead, the damage is primarily driven by the host's own immune response attempting, but failing, to control the persistent viral replication.[2] This sustained, immune-mediated inflammatory process, characterized by the infiltration of lymphocytes into the liver, creates a microenvironment of chronic injury.[14] Over time, this triggers a pathological wound-healing response that results in the excessive accumulation of extracellular matrix (ECM) proteins, a process known as liver fibrosis.[22]

At the cellular level, this fibrogenic process is orchestrated by the activation of hepatic stellate cells (HSCs). In a healthy liver, HSCs are quiescent, vitamin A-storing cells. However, in the setting of chronic HCV-induced inflammation, they undergo a profound transformation, activating and differentiating into myofibroblast-like cells. These activated HSCs become the primary producers of fibrillar collagens (predominantly types I and III) and other ECM components that form the scar tissue of fibrosis.[14] This process is not merely a passive response to injury; HCV itself actively promotes fibrogenesis. Viral proteins, such as the core protein and nonstructural protein 5A (NS5A), have been shown to directly stimulate HSCs and upregulate key pro-fibrogenic signaling molecules, most notably transforming growth factor-beta (). [14] Concurrently, the chronic inflammatory state generates high levels of oxidative stress, which further damages hepatocytes and perpetuates the cycle of injury, inflammation, and HSC activation.[14]

This relentless deposition of scar tissue gradually remodels the liver's architecture. Over a period of 20 to 30 years, this process can culminate in cirrhosis—a state of advanced, bridging fibrosis and regenerative nodule formation—in approximately 5% to 25% of individuals with chronic HCV infection.[3] The rate of fibrosis progression is not uniform across all patients and can be significantly accelerated by a number of host and environmental co-factors. These include heavy alcohol consumption, smoking, obesity, the presence of hepatic steatosis (fatty liver), type 2 diabetes, older age at the time of infection, and co-infection with either the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) or hepatitis B virus (HBV).[2]

B. Decompensated Cirrhosis: The Clinical Manifestations of Liver Failure

The development of cirrhosis marks a critical turning point in the natural history of chronic HCV infection. While many patients with cirrhosis may remain in a "compensated" state, meaning they are largely asymptomatic, a significant subset will eventually transition to "decompensated" cirrhosis. This transition, which occurs in 10% to 20% of cirrhotic patients within five years, is defined by the onset of overt, life-threatening clinical complications of liver failure.[2]

The foundational pathophysiological derangement of cirrhosis is the development of portal hypertension. The extensive scarring and architectural distortion of the cirrhotic liver physically obstruct blood flow through the portal vein, leading to a dangerous increase in pressure within this system.[2] This elevated portal pressure is the direct cause of the major decompensation events:

- **Ascites:** This is the pathological accumulation of fluid within the peritoneal (abdominal) cavity. It is driven by a combination of increased pressure in the portal system, which forces fluid out of the blood vessels, and the failing liver's diminished capacity to synthesize albumin, a protein crucial for maintaining oncotic pressure and keeping fluid within the vasculature.[2]
- **Variceal Hemorrhage:** Portal hypertension forces blood to be rerouted through collateral vessels, leading to the formation of varices—dilated, thin-walled veins, most commonly in the esophagus and stomach. These varices are extremely fragile and prone to rupture, which can cause massive, life-threatening gastrointestinal bleeding.[2] The risk of a first variceal bleed is strongly correlated with the severity of portal hypertension, which can be quantified by measuring the hepatic venous pressure gradient (HVPG).[30]
- **Hepatic Encephalopathy:** This is a complex spectrum of neuropsychiatric disturbances that occurs when the failing liver can no longer perform its vital detoxification functions. Neurotoxins, most notably ammonia, which are normally cleared by the liver, accumulate in the bloodstream and cross the blood-brain barrier, impairing cerebral function. Clinical manifestations range from subtle cognitive changes and confusion to profound lethargy, asterixis (a characteristic flapping tremor), and, in severe cases, coma.[2]

C. Hepatocellular Carcinoma (HCC): The Malignant Culmination of Chronic Infection

Chronic HCV infection is a primary etiological agent for hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), the most common form of liver cancer. It is the leading cause of HCC in the United States, Europe, and Japan.[26] The risk of developing HCC is profoundly elevated in patients who have already progressed to cirrhosis, with a

staggering annual incidence rate of 1% to 7%.[3] The development of HCC in the context of HCV is a multi-step process that unfolds over decades, driven by a synergistic assault of both indirect and direct viral mechanisms.

The primary pathway to HCV-induced cancer is believed to be an indirect, inflammation-driven process. The cirrhotic liver represents a pro-carcinogenic microenvironment, a concept often referred to as "field cancerization" or the "field effect".[26] Decades of chronic inflammation, continuous cycles of hepatocyte death and regeneration, and persistent oxidative stress create a milieu that is ripe for malignant transformation. This high rate of cellular turnover dramatically increases the probability of spontaneous genetic and epigenetic mutations. Over time, these alterations can accumulate in a clone of hepatocytes, leading to the initiation and promotion of a neoplastic growth.[2]

In addition to this inflammation-mediated pathway, HCV can also exert direct pro-carcinogenic effects. Although HCV is an RNA virus and does not integrate its genetic material into the host cell's genome, several of its encoded proteins have been shown to function as viral oncoproteins. These proteins can directly subvert cellular pathways that normally act to suppress tumor formation. For instance, the HCV core protein, NS3, and NS5A have all been demonstrated to interact with and inhibit the function of critical tumor suppressor proteins, such as p53 and the retinoblastoma protein (RB1). These host proteins are essential guardians of the genome, responsible for halting the cell cycle in response to DNA damage and initiating apoptosis (programmed cell death) in irreparably damaged cells. By disabling these "brakes" on cell growth, HCV proteins allow cells with accumulating mutations to survive and proliferate. Furthermore, HCV proteins can actively stimulate cellular growth and survival pathways, such as the RAF/MAPK/ERK and WNT/-catenin signaling cascades, directly pushing the cell toward uncontrolled division.[26]

This dual mechanism represents a perfect storm for carcinogenesis. The indirect inflammatory pathway acts as an engine for generating genetic errors, while the direct actions of viral proteins systematically dismantle the cell's machinery for correcting those errors. This synergy between creating damage and disabling repair pathways dramatically accelerates the progression to malignancy. Beyond the presence of cirrhosis, other factors that further amplify the risk of HCC in patients with chronic HCV include viral genotype (with some evidence suggesting genotype 3 confers a higher risk), concurrent alcohol consumption, smoking, and the presence of metabolic comorbidities like hepatic steatosis and insulin resistance.[2]

The progression of liver disease from chronic inflammation to cirrhosis represents a critical shift. While fibrosis is a dynamic process that may be reversible, the establishment of cirrhosis involves irreversible architectural changes that create a self-sustaining carcinogenic environment. Even after the successful eradication of HCV with modern therapies, patients who have already developed advanced fibrosis or cirrhosis carry a significant and permanent residual risk of developing HCC.[26] This sobering reality means that viral cure is a necessary but not always sufficient condition to abrogate cancer risk in patients with advanced liver disease, highlighting the absolute necessity of continued, lifelong HCC surveillance in this population.

Table 1: Key Hepatic Complications of Chronic HCV

Complication	Pathophysiology Summary	Typical Timeframe to Develop	Key Clinical Features/Markers	Major Accelerating Risk Factors
Chronic Hepatitis	Persistent, immune-mediated necroinflammation of liver parenchyma driven by chronic HCV infection [14].	> 6 months post-infection	Often asymptomatic; may have fatigue, malaise. Elevated ALT/AST levels [2].	N/A
Fibrosis	Pathological wound-healing response to chronic inflammation, characterized by activation of hepatic stellate cells and excessive deposition of extracellular matrix (collagen) [23].	5-20 years	Asymptomatic. Diagnosed via liver biopsy, transient elastography, or serum biomarker panels [21].	Alcohol, HIV/HBV co-infection, obesity, insulin resistance, male sex, older age at infection [2].
Compensated Cirrhosis	Advanced, bridging fibrosis with architectural distortion and regenerative nodule formation. Liver function is largely preserved [2].	20-30 years	Largely asymptomatic. May have fatigue. Physical exam may show spider nevi or palmar erythema. Thrombocytopenia is an early sign [2].	Same as for fibrosis progression.

Complication	Pathophysiology Summary	Typical Timeframe to Develop	Key Clinical Features/Markers	Major Accelerating Risk Factors
Decompensated Cirrhosis	Failure of liver function due to advanced cirrhosis and severe portal hypertension, leading to overt clinical complications [2].	Occurs in 10-20% of cirrhotics within 5 years	Ascites (abdominal fluid), variceal hemorrhage (GI bleeding), hepatic encephalopathy (confusion, coma), jaundice [2].	Continued alcohol use, infections (e.g., SBP), GI bleeding, certain medications.
Hepatocellular Carcinoma (HCC)	Malignant transformation of hepatocytes driven by chronic inflammation, regeneration, and direct effects of viral proteins that disrupt tumor suppressor pathways [26].	20-40 years (almost exclusively in cirrhotic patients)	Often asymptomatic in early stages. May present with weight loss, abdominal pain, decompensation. Elevated alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) [29].	Cirrhosis is the single greatest risk factor. Alcohol, smoking, diabetes, genotype 3 infection [26].

IV. The Therapeutic Revolution: Impact of Direct-Acting Antivirals on Disease Complications

The landscape of Hepatitis C management was fundamentally transformed by the advent of direct-acting antiviral (DAA) agents. These all-oral, well-tolerated regimens target specific viral proteins essential for HCV replication, leading to a virologic cure in over 95% of treated individuals.[3] This cure is defined as a sustained virologic response (SVR), the absence of detectable HCV RNA in the blood 12 weeks or more after the completion of therapy. The achievement of SVR has profound and far-reaching benefits, halting the progression of liver disease and leading to the amelioration of many, though not all, systemic complications.

A. Halting and Reversing Hepatic Progression

The eradication of HCV through DAA therapy has a dramatic and positive impact on the health of the liver.

- **Improvement in Liver Function and Fibrosis:** Achieving SVR leads to marked improvements in hepatic function, even in patients with advanced, decompensated cirrhosis. This is clinically evident through significant improvements in the Model for End-Stage Liver Disease (MELD) score and increases in serum albumin levels, both of which are key indicators of the liver's synthetic capacity.[55] In some cases, the improvement in liver function is so substantial that patients who were previously listed for liver transplantation can be delisted.[57] Furthermore, there is compelling evidence that SVR can lead to the regression of liver fibrosis. Multiple studies using non-invasive methods like transient elastography have demonstrated a significant and progressive decrease in liver stiffness measurements in the months and years following successful DAA therapy, indicating a reversal of scarring.[54]
- **Reduction in Decompensation and Mortality:** One of the most critical benefits of SVR is the profound reduction in the risk of future clinical events. Successful treatment dramatically lowers the incidence of liver decompensation, such as the development of new-onset ascites or variceal bleeding.[59] This translates directly into improved survival. Large cohort studies and meta-analyses have consistently shown that achieving SVR is associated with a significant reduction in both liver-related mortality and all-cause mortality.[60] A comprehensive meta-analysis found that patients treated with DAAs had a 56% reduced risk of death compared to their untreated counterparts.[60]
- **Reduction in HCC Risk:** While viral eradication cannot completely erase the damage done in a cirrhotic liver, it significantly mitigates the future risk of cancer. Achieving SVR substantially reduces the incidence of *de novo* HCC in patients with chronic HCV.[60] Initial concerns that emerged in the early DAA era, suggesting a possible paradoxical increase in HCC risk post-treatment, have been robustly refuted by larger, more methodologically sound cohort studies. These later studies concluded that the initial observations were the result of confounding and selection bias, as clinicians appropriately prioritized treating patients with the most advanced liver disease first—the very group already at the highest risk for HCC. The current consensus is that DAA therapy does not increase HCC risk; rather, by eradicating the primary oncogenic driver, it confers a significant protective effect.[61]

B. Ameliorating Systemic Disease: A Variable Landscape of Resolution

The impact of achieving SVR on the diverse spectrum of extrahepatic manifestations is generally positive but is also characterized by a notable heterogeneity in response. For many EHMs, the elimination of the viral trigger leads to clinical improvement or resolution. However, for others, particularly those with a long-standing autoimmune component, the link between virologic cure and complete clinical remission is less direct, revealing a complex interplay between the virus, the host immune system, and established end-organ damage.[63]

- **Cryoglobulinemic Vasculitis and Renal Disease:** DAA therapy is now the cornerstone of management

for HCV-associated MCV.[63] SVR rates in this population are excellent (>90%), and the majority of patients experience a significant clinical response, with marked improvement or resolution of purpura, arthralgias, and neuropathy.[68] However, the response is often neither immediate nor complete. Rates of complete clinical remission vary widely in the literature, ranging from 39% to as high as 90%.[64] A subset of patients experience persistent or relapsing vasculitic symptoms despite having been cured of the virus.[69] This dissociation is also seen immunologically; circulating cryoglobulins often decrease but may persist indefinitely in a substantial number of patients post-SVR.[71] For patients with associated glomerulonephritis, DAA therapy improves long-term kidney survival and can lead to the amelioration of proteinuria and stabilization of eGFR.[51] Nevertheless, the renal response can lag considerably behind the virologic response, and patients with severe, established kidney damage may remain dependent on adjunctive immunosuppressive therapy to control their disease even after HCV eradication.[75]

- **B-cell Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma:** Viral eradication with DAAs significantly reduces the risk of an HCV-infected individual subsequently developing NHL.[76] For patients who already have an HCV-associated indolent B-cell lymphoma, DAA therapy can induce hematologic remission and is now considered a standard first-line treatment option, often obviating the need for immediate chemotherapy.[45] In cases of more aggressive lymphomas, the concurrent or sequential use of DAAs with standard immunochemotherapy has been shown to improve patient outcomes and survival.[77]
- **Dermatologic and Metabolic Conditions:** The impact of SVR on other EHMs is also largely beneficial. DAA therapy alone has been shown to be an effective treatment for porphyria cutanea tarda, leading to sustained clinical remission without the need for traditional therapies like phlebotomy or hydroxychloroquine.[78] Achieving SVR is also clearly associated with improvements in insulin resistance and glucose metabolism, and it reduces the long-term risk of incident cardiovascular disease.[48] The effect on lichen planus is less predictable; while some case reports describe resolution of lesions following DAA therapy, others have documented paradoxical flares or even new-onset cases of lichen planus in patients after achieving SVR, suggesting a more complex underlying immunopathogenesis.[44]

The variable and sometimes incomplete resolution of these autoimmune-mediated EHMs, despite the universal success of viral eradication, points to a crucial concept in the post-DAA era: the "immunological scar." In some patients, the immune dysregulation initiated and sustained by decades of chronic HCV infection appears to become self-perpetuating. The B-cell clones responsible for producing cryoglobulins and other autoantibodies, having been chronically stimulated for years, may acquire autonomous survival signals that render them independent of the original viral antigen. Once the virus is cleared, these clones may continue to proliferate and produce pathogenic antibodies, leaving behind a persistent autoimmune state. This phenomenon explains why a virologic cure does not always translate to an immunologic or clinical cure and why some patients with severe vasculitis may require additional immunomodulatory therapies, such as rituximab, to control their symptoms even after the virus is gone.[67]

This reality, combined with the residual risk of HCC in cirrhotics and the potential for irreversible end-organ damage (e.g., in severe peripheral neuropathy [73]), builds a powerful and compelling argument for the importance of early diagnosis and timely intervention. The longer the infection is allowed to persist, the greater the likelihood of developing these irreversible or difficult-to-reverse hepatic and extrahepatic complications. The remarkable efficacy of DAA therapy is therefore maximized when it is deployed before these "points of no return" are reached, providing a strong public health rationale for broad screening policies and immediate treatment upon diagnosis.

Table 2: Impact of DAA-Induced SVR on Major Complications

Complication	Virologic Outcome (SVR Rate)	Typical Clinical Outcome	Key Considerations/Nuances
Hepatic Complications			
Liver Fibrosis	>95%	Regression of fibrosis and decrease in liver stiffness over time.[54]	Reversal is more pronounced in earlier stages of fibrosis.
Decompensated Cirrhosis	>90% (in this population)	Improvement in MELD score and liver function; reduced risk of future decompensation events.[55]	Some patients may improve enough to be delisted from transplant lists.
Hepatocellular Carcinoma (HCC)	>95%	Significant reduction in the incidence of *de novo* HCC.[60]	Risk is not eliminated in patients with pre-existing cirrhosis; lifelong surveillance is mandatory post-SVR [26].

Complication	Virologic Outcome (SVR Rate)	Typical Clinical Outcome	Key Considerations/Nuances
Extrahepatic Complications			
Mixed Cryoglobulinemic Vasculitis (MCV)	>90%	High rate of clinical improvement (purpura, arthralgia), but complete clinical remission is variable (39-90%).[64]	Cryoglobulins may persist post-SVR ("immunological scar"). Symptoms can relapse. Severe cases may require adjunct immunotherapy [67]
HCV-Associated Glomerulonephritis	>90%	Improvement in proteinuria and eGFR; improved long-term kidney survival.[51]	Renal response often lags behind virologic response. Some patients remain dependent on immunosuppression [75].
B-cell Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma (NHL)	>95%	Regression of existing indolent lymphomas. Reduced risk of developing new NHL.[45]	Rare cases of late-onset NHL post-SVR have been reported, suggesting a need for continued vigilance [81].
Porphyria Cutanea Tarda (PCT)	>95%	High rate of clinical and biochemical remission, often without need for phlebotomy or hydroxychloroquine.[78]	SVR appears to be sufficient treatment for both conditions.
Insulin Resistance / T2DM	>95%	Improvement in insulin sensitivity and glucose metabolism. Reduced risk of incident T2DM and cardiovascular events.[48]	Benefit is most pronounced in preventing new-onset metabolic disease.
Lichen Planus	>95%	Variable and unpredictable. Some reports of resolution, but also reports of flares or new-onset disease post-SVR.[44]	The relationship remains poorly understood; may involve complex, persistent immune shifts after viral clearance.

V. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

Chronic Hepatitis C virus infection is a complex, multifaceted disease whose pathological burden extends far beyond the liver. The evidence synthesized in this review firmly establishes chronic HCV as a systemic inflammatory and lymphoproliferative disorder. If left untreated, its relentless progression can lead to devastating hepatic consequences, including cirrhosis, end-stage liver failure, and hepatocellular carcinoma. Simultaneously, the persistent immune dysregulation it incites can give rise to a host of debilitating extrahepatic manifestations, ranging from vasculitis and kidney disease to metabolic syndromes and hematologic malignancies. The insidious, often asymptomatic nature of the infection for many years allows this extensive damage to accumulate silently, underscoring the critical need for proactive public health screening initiatives.

The development of direct-acting antiviral agents represents a monumental achievement in modern medicine, transforming a chronic, difficult-to-manage infection into a curable condition for nearly all patients. The clinical benefits of achieving a sustained virologic response are profound and unequivocal. SVR effectively halts the progression of liver disease, leads to the regression of fibrosis, dramatically reduces the incidence of hepatic decompensation and hepatocellular carcinoma, and significantly improves overall survival. Furthermore, viral eradication leads to the amelioration or resolution of many of the associated extrahepatic diseases, reducing the systemic burden of the infection.

However, this therapeutic triumph is not a panacea. The data reveal important nuances and lingering challenges that define the next frontier in HCV care. The persistence of a significant, albeit reduced, risk of HCC in patients with pre-existing cirrhosis demonstrates that the pro-carcinogenic "field effect" can outlive the virus that created it. Similarly, the incomplete clinical and immunological responses seen in a subset of patients with cryoglobulinemic vasculitis and other autoimmune EHMs suggest the establishment of an "immunological scar"—a self-sustaining B-cell proliferation that is no longer dependent on the viral trigger. This highlights a crucial takeaway: the legacy of chronic infection can persist long after the virus itself has been eliminated.

These realities point toward several key directions for future research and clinical practice. First, long-term, prospective follow-up of large patient cohorts who have achieved SVR is essential to better understand the durability of EHM remission, the true long-term incidence of HCC, and the factors that predict incomplete responses. Second, there is a pressing need to develop and validate biomarkers that can identify

patients at high risk for residual complications post-SVR, such as those with persistent B-cell clones or a pro-fibrogenic liver microenvironment. Such tools would allow for more personalized post-treatment surveillance and management strategies. Finally, for patients with severe or refractory EHMs, future studies should focus on optimizing therapeutic approaches, potentially investigating the role of combined antiviral and targeted immunomodulatory strategies to address both the viral trigger and the persistent, autonomous immune response.

In conclusion, while the war against the Hepatitis C virus has largely been won with the advent of DAAs, the focus must now shift to managing the long-term consequences in a generation of patients who endured decades of chronic infection. The ultimate message is one of both triumph and caution: celebrating the cure while remaining vigilant in caring for the cured.

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