

Global partners issue 'historic call to action' on hepatitis

Written by Irina Eramova and Martin C. Donoghoe on 28 July 2014 in News
News

Routine immunisation and improved understanding of the disease will lead to an EU generation 'free of hepatitis', say Irina Eramova and Martin C. Donoghoe.



Viral hepatitis - a group of infectious diseases known as hepatitis A, B, C, D, and E - affects close to 500 million people worldwide, causing acute and chronic liver disease and killing close to 1.4 million people every year. Hepatitis remains largely ignored or unknown. Every year on 28 July, the WHO and partners mark world hepatitis day to increase the awareness and understanding of viral hepatitis and the diseases that it causes. This year, we urge policymakers, health workers and the public to 'think again' about this silent killer. Hepatitis B and C are the most prevalent types of the disease in the WHO European region, and the main focus of WHO/Europe's prevention and treatment efforts. An estimated 13.3 million people live with hepatitis B, and 15 million people with hepatitis C, in the region. Of those infected, over 120,000 die every year. Two thirds of the people in the region with hepatitis B and C live in eastern Europe and central Asia.

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Hepatitis B is a viral infection that attacks the liver and can cause both acute and chronic disease. The virus is transmitted through contact with the blood or other body fluids of an infected person. Routine immunisation of new born babies and children with the hepatitis B vaccine is the best measure against this type of the disease. This is what most countries in the European region have introduced and what will ultimately lead to generations free of hepatitis B. Hepatitis C is a liver disease which can cause both acute and chronic hepatitis infection, ranging in severity from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a serious, lifelong illness. The hepatitis C virus is transmitted through blood, and people typically become infected due to unsafe injection practices, inadequate sterilisation of medical equipment in some healthcare settings, and unscreened blood and blood products. No vaccine is currently available against hepatitis C, so the disease must be tackled by improving prevention, diagnosis and treatment. Preventing hepatitis C is most effective when people understand the disease and follow safe injecting practices. A new and effective treatment against hepatitis C is now available to which all people in need should have access.

This year, the WHO and its member states have made significant advances to tackle the disease. In March, participants at the WHO's first global partners meeting on hepatitis agreed on a historic 'call to action to scale up the global hepatitis response'. In April, WHO issued new recommendations for treating hepatitis C. And in May, world health assembly delegates from 194 member states adopted a resolution to improve the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of viral hepatitis.

About the author

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