

## MEPs call for strong EU political commitment on eliminating viral hepatitis

Written by Karin Kadenbach on 10 July 2017 in Opinion  
Opinion

Need for an EU-wide Hepatitis surveillance programme, says campaigning deputy, Karin Kadenbach.



**Karin Kadenbach** | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

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Viral hepatitis is a major European killer. Within the 53 countries of the World Health Organization's European region, almost 30 million people live with either hepatitis B or C. Around 120,000 die from the disease annually, more than from HIV/AIDS.

The European Parliament has been at the forefront in drawing attention to the need to tackle the disease. In 2007, it passed a resolution calling on the European Commission and EU governments to recognise hepatitis C as "an urgent public health issue".

A decade on, it is time to take stock. That is why I and fellow MEPs adopted a resolution on the EU's response to HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Hepatitis C in our recent plenary session on 5 July. This takes account of the WHO global strategy and its more specific European action plan – both presented last year – to eliminate the disease by 2030. These build on the third UN Sustainable Development Goal to “ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages”.

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To give added impetus to our efforts, I chaired the launch in early June in the Parliament of the new ACHIEVE coalition (Associations Collaborating on Hepatitis to Immunize and Eliminate the Viruses in Europe). This group speaks with one voice for several organisations representing patients, clinicians, researchers and the wider public.

I believe the 2030 target is perfectly achievable. We have all the medical and other expertise required and our resolution sets out in detail the various measures that will help us meet our goal.

As Tatjana Reic, ACHIEVE's chair and President of the European Liver Patients' Association told the inaugural meeting: “We have a cure for hepatitis C and hepatitis B can be effectively controlled through immunisation and treatment. What is needed is a concerted effort by all member states in favour of prevention, screening and access to treatment and care.”

As a basic starting point, we must establish the true scale of viral hepatitis in Europe. Unlike HIV/AIDS, for instance, data on the disease is distinctly patchy. Accurate data is essential for the European Commission which is committed to tracking the progress made in implementing the UN sustainable development goals.

Without accurate and comparable core data, the Commission will be flying blind when trying to monitor the impact of measures to eliminate viral hepatitis.

"As a basic starting point, we must establish the true scale of viral hepatitis in Europe"

Professor Jeffrey Lazarus, ACHIEVE member from ISGlobal, Hospital Clínic at the University of Barcelona, underlined the following point at the new coalition's launch: “We need governments to respond to the urgent need for better data... with a greater investment in monitoring key indicators of progress.”

Our resolution calls on the European Commission and Member States to put in place an EU-wide surveillance programme that can detect outbreaks in a timely manner, assess incidence trends, inform disease burden estimates and track in ‘real time’ the diagnosis, treatment and care cascade,

including in specific vulnerable groups.”

An update of the 2004 Dublin Declaration to fight HIV/AIDS in Europe and Central Asia can offer a way forward by including viral hepatitis, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS on an equal footing.

That initiative, the brainchild of the then Irish EU Council Presidency, was ground-breaking because the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and WHO Europe worked together to create a harmonised surveillance system across the WHO Europe region, that vastly improved our knowledge of the disease and the measures required to tackle it.

This is why the Parliament is looking for a strong EU political commitment to develop a comprehensive policy framework that addresses HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and viral hepatitis. This should take account of the different national circumstances and challenges not just inside the Union, but also among our neighbours. This political commitment needs to be matched by adequate funding.

We would like a future Council Presidency to take the lead to secure political support for action. This would provide tangible evidence of the EU’s commitment to meeting the 2030 WHO Europe hepatitis elimination target, whilst establishing a mechanism to ensure the EU can live up to its UN Sustainable Development Goals commitments to end and reduce the HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and viral hepatitis epidemics.

The upcoming World Health Day on 28 July would be a perfect opportunity for a Council Presidency to accept the challenge.

### **About the author**

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