

Press Release

World Hepatitis Alliance Warns that Stigma is a Major Threat to New Initiative Against Hepatitis Epidemic

Patient community calls on governments to do more to reduce stigma as World Hepatitis Day receives official WHO endorsement for the first time

Switzerland, Geneva. Thursday 28th July, 2011 – On World Hepatitis Day the World Hepatitis Alliance is warning governments that, unless they also tackle stigma and discrimination, important new action to improve and save millions of lives will be wasted.

The warning from the patient community comes one year after the agreement of an historic World Health Organization (WHO) resolution, which for the first time described what is expected of governments to deliver improvements in awareness, surveillance, prevention, diagnosis and treatment of viral hepatitis. The resolution was passed just weeks after the Alliance published research that found only a few - less than one third - of governments funded action to reduce the stigmatisation of, and discrimination against, people living with hepatitis B or C¹.

“Viral hepatitis is a global epidemic. The decision of the 193 countries of the WHO to adopt a resolution last year was the first step in tackling it, but we have a long way to go” said Charles Gore, President of the Alliance. “Right now the resolution is just a piece of paper. The challenge for governments is to action it, and that will be immeasurably harder if we don’t at the same time vigorously confront stigma.”

500 million people are living with chronic hepatitis B and C worldwide but, despite the huge burden, there is widespread ignorance of the diseases. This ignorance leads people to assume they are not at risk; it prevents people coming forward for testing and treatment; it stops people paying attention to awareness messages and so increases the risk of infection as people are unaware of the major routes of transmission; and it reinforces stigma.

The theme for this first official WHO-sponsored World Hepatitis Day is ‘Hepatitis affects everyone, everywhere. Know it. Confront it’, highlighting the huge reach of this epidemic, the importance of

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getting informed and the need to use that information to tackle the stigma that has kept this epidemic so silent.

In support of efforts to combat stigma the Alliance is launching an interactive 'wall' of personal stories to encourage people across the world to speak out about their experiences. By describing the reality of hepatitis, patients and those affected by this disease can radically change the way it is perceived, reinforcing the need for a non-judgemental, co-ordinated global approach that will dramatically improve prevention and rapidly decrease the number of needless deaths.

"The initiative for this event originated with civil society activists, including the World Hepatitis Alliance and patient groups" commented Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General of the WHO. "They perceived a great need to increase awareness of viral hepatitis, the diseases it causes, and the discrimination often faced by patients. They wanted to see action against these diseases on several fronts. I agree entirely with these objectives."

WHO Endorsement of World Hepatitis Day

World Hepatitis Day is the principal hepatitis awareness event on the global healthcare calendar and became an official WHO day in 2010 with the passing of World Health Assembly resolution WHA63.18. The WHO is now working with the Alliance as a collaborating partner on World Hepatitis Day 2011 and in recognition of the birthday of Professor Baruch Blumberg, who won the Nobel Prize for discovering the hepatitis B virus, WHO decided that World Hepatitis Day should take place on 28 July. Sadly Professor Blumberg died in April 2011, and this will add further poignancy to the date this year.

Did You Know?

- Approximately 500 million people worldwide are infected with hepatitis B or C²
- This is over 15 times the number infected with HIV/AIDS³
- Between them hepatitis B and C kill one million people a year²
- Less than one third (32%) of governments report funding action to reduce the stigmatisation of, and discrimination against, people living with hepatitis B or C¹

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- 81% of low income country governments have not funded any awareness work and 85% have not acted to reduce stigma¹
- One in three people on the planet has been exposed to either or both viruses

World Hepatitis Alliance

The World Hepatitis Alliance provides global leadership and supports action that will halt the death toll and improve the lives of people living with chronic viral hepatitis B and C. Through better awareness, prevention, care, support and access to treatment, our ultimate goal is to work with governments to eradicate these diseases from the planet.

The World Hepatitis Alliance is a Non-Governmental Organisation representing more than 280 hepatitis B and C patient groups from around the world. The World Hepatitis Alliance is governed by a board consisting entirely of hepatitis B or C patients and elected by patient groups from the six WHO world regions: Africa, the Americas, Eastern Mediterranean, Europe, South-East Asia and Western Pacific. For further information visit: www.worldhepatitisalliance.org

World Hepatitis Alliance – Seeking a world without viral hepatitis B and C.

World Hepatitis Day

The fourth annual World Hepatitis Day will take place on Thursday 28th July 2011, as part of an ongoing campaign launched by the World Hepatitis Alliance in 2008. This is the first year that the WHO has endorsed World Hepatitis Day.

The 2011 theme for World Hepatitis Day is '***This is hepatitis... Know it. Confront it. Hepatitis affects everyone, everywhere.***' This theme complements '***Am I Number 12?***' which remains the principle awareness-raising campaign of the World Hepatitis Alliance and has been a central component of the World Hepatitis Day movement since its launch. This inclusive theme emphasises the scale of viral hepatitis (1 in 12 of the global population is chronically infected with hepatitis B or C) and helps combat the stigma often associated with hepatitis B and C by conveying the fact that these viruses do not discriminate.

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References

¹ Viral Hepatitis: Global Policy. World Hepatitis Alliance in conjunction with the World Health Organization:

<http://www.worldhepatitisalliance.org/en/Policy/2010PolicyReport.aspx> (accessed 18 July, 2011)

² World Health Organization. Global Alert and Response (GAR) http://www.who.int/csr/disease/hepatitis/world_hepatitis_day/en/ (accessed 18 July, 2011)

³ World Health Organization. Global summary of the AIDS epidemic. http://data.unaids.org/pub/Report/2009/JC1700_Epi_Update_2009_en.pdf (accessed 18 July, 2011)