



Address by

**DR MAHMOUD FIKRI
REGIONAL DIRECTOR**

WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

on the occasion of

LAUNCH OF THE NATIONAL HEPATITIS STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK 2017–2021

Islamabad, Pakistan, 8 October 2017

Honourable State Minister of National Health Services Regulations and Coordination

Ms. Saira Afzal Tarar

Honourable Health Minister of Punjab Khawaja Imran Nazir

Honourable Health Minister of Sindh Dr Sikandar Mandhro

Honourable Health Minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) Mr. Shahram Khan Tarakai

Honourable Health Minister of Baluchistan Mr. Rahmat Saleh Baloch

Honourable Chief Minister of Gilgit Baltistan Mr. Khafiz Hafeezur Rehman

Honourable Health Minister of Azad Jammu Kashmir Dr. Muhammad Najeeb Naqi

H.E Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General

Your Excellencies, Dear Colleagues, Partners, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalamou Alaykum....It gives me great pleasure to be here in this beautiful city of Islamabad to launch the first national strategic framework on viral hepatitis. I note with appreciation the highest level of commitment to implementing this strategy, expressed by Her Excellency the Federal Minister of National Health Services Regulations and Coordination and all the esteemed Chief Ministers and high-level decision-makers here with us today. Special thanks to WHO Director-General, Dr Tedros Adhanom for being here with us today to witness and support all efforts towards hepatitis elimination in the Region. The presence of Dr Tedros is a blessing that encourages all of us to be committed.

Our region is the most affected by hepatitis in the world. Estimates indicate that more than 15 million people in the Region are currently chronically infected with hepatitis C, and 21 million with hepatitis B. Viral hepatitis has long been neglected. People are suffering and lives are being lost unnecessarily. Yet hepatitis B and C are preventable: hepatitis C is also now curable and hepatitis B is manageable. We have missed past opportunities. We are now on the right path but we still have a long way to go.

Unfortunately, many people in Pakistan and other countries of the Region still acquire the infection in health care settings, through unsafe injections and poor infection control, as well

as through unscreened blood transfusions. Mother-to-child transmission is the main cause of hepatitis among children. Furthermore, many people who are at risk of HIV are also at risk of hepatitis B and C infections, due to unsafe sexual practices or injecting drug use. This is unacceptable and unethical, given that we have a wealth of evidence on how these transmissions can be prevented. We have ample guidance on how blood transfusion can be made safer and how infection spread can be controlled in health care settings. And above all, we have a very powerful vaccine with which, right at birth, children can be protected from hepatitis B for life. The time for action is now.

At the 67th session of the World Health Assembly, Member States adopted a comprehensive resolution urging countries to develop and implement coordinated multisectoral national plans for preventing, diagnosing and treating viral hepatitis. In parallel, WHO developed the first ever Global Health Sector Strategy for Viral Hepatitis. This strategy is rooted in the global commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals and to universal health coverage. It sets out the vision of global stakeholders and Member States towards eliminating viral hepatitis by 2030.

At the regional level I have given special priority to hepatitis B and C prevention, diagnosis and treatment, and it is part of the regional roadmap. Furthermore, to guide implementation of the Global Health Sector Strategy for Viral Hepatitis within our region, a regional action plan for the hepatitis response has been developed. This action plan was endorsed by Member States at the 63rd session of the Regional Committee in 2016.

Hepatitis testing is a gateway to treatment, and treatment is lifesaving. In this respect, I acknowledge the efforts paid by some Member States in our region. Egypt, for example, is a country that shares with Pakistan 80% of the burden of hepatitis C in our region. Within the past 2 years over one million people have been treated with the new direct acting antivirals and cured from hepatitis C in Egypt. I commend those efforts and call for accelerating them in all countries because many patients are waiting for us to make treatment with those medicines available, affordable and accessible. Though we have missed opportunities in the past, we are now on the right track.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I take this opportunity to acknowledge the leadership and progress of Her Excellency Ms Saira Afzal Tarar on the launch of the national strategic framework on viral hepatitis today. It is certainly a major step towards saving the lives of millions in Pakistan. I also commend you for the effort made in reducing the price of direct acting antivirals, which are essential for curing viral hepatitis C.

On this occasion, I call upon all Member States, local and international partners and civil society groups to join hands with WHO in this noble response to save lives. No one should die of viral hepatitis, no one should get infected and no one should be left behind when we know how to prevent this.

Finally, I would like to assure you that WHO will continue to support and work closely with the Government in Pakistan to implement and scale up all interventions for viral hepatitis

control detailed in the national strategy, including providing birth-dose vaccination against hepatitis B, enhancing prevention strategies and ensuring equitable access to quality diagnosis and treatment, until hepatitis is eliminated from your country.

Before closing, I would like to thank Her Excellency Ms Saira Afzal Tarar for the kind invitation to attend this important event here in this beautiful city Islamabad. I am sure that the hepatitis response after this event will gain momentum; and I extend my personal wishes for success in the implementation of your strategy.

Thank you.