



Message from

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on the occasion of
World Hepatitis Day
28 July 2014

Viral hepatitis is one of the most common and serious infections in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region. Every year, around 4.3 million people are infected with hepatitis B virus and 800 000 with hepatitis C virus. By the age of 15, half the children in the Region will have been exposed to hepatitis A. Hepatitis E prevalence is also high in some countries, yet the disease has been neglected for many years by most countries.

Viral hepatitis affects the liver. Chronic infection with hepatitis B or C is the leading cause of liver cirrhosis and liver cancer. However, viral hepatitis is preventable. And when people acquire it, it is treatable and in many cases can be cured. Now is the time to take the road to beating hepatitis.

In 2010 WHO declared 28 July as World Hepatitis Day to be an occasion to raise awareness about viral hepatitis, and to call for access to treatment, better prevention programmes and concerted global action. Since 2010, every year on July, many governments and civil society organizations around the world observe World Hepatitis Day. This year the regional slogan is "Care for your liver. Think about hepatitis". The regional campaign aims to raise the awareness of the general public about the different types of hepatitis virus, their modes of transmission, the ways to prevent and treat them and, when living with chronic hepatitis, how to prevent liver damage due to infection.

Our region is marked by low awareness of hepatitis. Many people are exposed to viral hepatitis through poor access to clean water, unsafe practices in health care settings, and unsafe blood or organ transfusions; as well as through behavioural risks, such as neglect of hygiene, unprotected sex and sharing of drug injection equipment and sharp instruments, such as in tattooing. With limited access to testing, people living with chronic hepatitis B or C may show no symptoms of their infection and therefore, unknowingly, may transmit the infection to others.

Left untreated, hepatitis can have a major economic impact on countries due to loss of life and decreased productivity. At the same time, the treatment of hepatitis with the medicines currently available is prohibitively expensive for low- and middle-income countries. In order to address this public health challenge effectively, we need to ensure that governments put in place a comprehensive approach in which there is concerted effort between the public sector, civil society, academia and the private sector. Such an approach should focus: on raising public awareness; ensuring policy is informed by and based on evidence from scientific research and surveillance; expanding access to prevention among all risk groups; and increasing access to diagnosis, care and treatment for those affected.

WHO remains committed to helping Member States rise to the challenge of hepatitis. At the global level, WHO is working on providing normative guidance for the management of hepatitis. It is also advocating for reduction in the price of treatment to make the necessary medicines more accessible for low- and middle-income countries. In the Regional Office, I have established a task force with representatives from across the various departments concerned with prevention, surveillance, diagnosis, care and treatment. With this commitment from WHO I look forward to fostering strong commitment also from Member States, and to providing them with the necessary technical support to establish policies that work and appropriate services. We have a long way to go, but there can be no doubt we are going in the right direction.