

2019: A Critical Year for the World Hepatitis Alliance

Michael Ninburg, President, WHA

Q. Mr Ninburg, why is 2019 such a crucial year for the viral hepatitis elimination campaign?

At this point in the HCV and HBV epidemics, every year is a critical year. In much of the world, for example, most people living with HCV belong to some form of the 'baby boomer' cohort. These people have been living with HCV for decades and most remain undiagnosed. More and more of them are presenting with serious complications of long-term infection (cirrhosis, ESLD, HCC) before they are even diagnosed with HCV. Our window of opportunity is closing to address this aging cohort.

Similarly, HBV is woefully under-diagnosed and globally kills twice as many people as HCV every year. Interventions for HBV are more involved than for HCV (serology, antiviral treatment) and access to HBV diagnostics and treatment remains a huge barrier in much of the world.

Finally, 2019 presents one of the last opportunities for countries to get on track to meet WHO's 2020 interim targets for hepatitis elimination. Countries will have to report on their progress toward the 2020 interim targets at the World Health Assembly in 2021 and very few are on track to reach the interim targets of a 30% reduction in incidence and a 10% reduction in mortality. The time to act is now. Sadly, it is already too late for many people.

Q. How does WHA aim to support WHO's viral hepatitis elimination campaign?

The World Hepatitis Alliance (WHA) is a global patient-led and patient-driven organization that represents millions of men, women and children who are affected by viral hepatitis all over the world. Our membership currently consists of 260 patient-led groups in 86 countries. This year on World Hepatitis Day we launched a three-year campaign titled 'Find the Missing Millions', a global campaign aimed at tackling the barriers to diagnosis. This work started with the release of our white paper 'Overcoming the Barriers to Diagnosis of Viral Hepatitis: The Role of Civil Society and the Affected Community in Finding the Missing Millions'. The report, which can be accessed on our website, set out a series of recommendations and highlights how civil society and affected communities can help overcome the barriers to diagnosis. The paper also calls on policymakers to harness the voices of those affected by viral hepatitis and recognize them as vital partners in the effort to eliminate viral hepatitis as a public health threat by 2030. In 2019, WHA will build on this work by developing an advocacy resource which will provide civil society and affected communities with the tools they need to effectively work with policymakers to implement the recommendations. This interactive tool will use case studies and experts to bring the recommendations to life and help remove the existing barriers that prevent people from getting tested and diagnosed.

Another initiative that we will be focusing on in 2019 is the NOhep movement, which has grown into a global

campaign to eliminate viral hepatitis. We know that hepatitis elimination is not achievable without a multi-stakeholder approach involving the affected community, policymakers and medical professionals. NOhep, which was launched by WHA in 2016, looks to empower community, policymakers and medical professionals to become part of the movement to eliminate viral hepatitis. Medical professionals are a critical part of the NOhep movement; and EASL has played a prominent role since the launch of our NOhep Medical Visionaries Program two years ago at EASL's International Liver Congress in Amsterdam. We subsequently launched the NOhep Medical Visionaries program at AASLD's Liver Meeting in 2017 and at the APASL annual meeting earlier this year in Delhi. To date, we have more than 300 NOhep Medical Visionaries. In 2018, our NOhep Medical Visionaries program released the 'NOhep Guide for Medical Professionals' outlining five principles of a NOhep Medical Visionary. In 2019, we will develop new tools and resources for medical professionals that can be used to share the innovative work of NOhep Visionaries and enable your peers to replicate best clinical and public health practices

Q. How many countries are on track for eliminating viral hepatitis by 2030?

2019 will also be an important year for WHO member countries, as they look to the 2020 interim targets for hepatitis elimination outlined in WHO's Global Health Sector Strategy on Viral Hepatitis. While every country committed to eliminate viral hepatitis by 2030, only 12 are on track to eliminate hepatitis C and fewer are on track to eliminate hepatitis B. Part of WHA's focus over the next year is to support countries and Ministries of Health to get on track with elimination, celebrate the success of the programs that are working and replicate the innovative practices that are saving lives. The 12 countries that are on track to achieve viral hepatitis elimination have all had a scale-up of diagnostics and testing to find the people unaware of their infection. The majority of these countries have worked with civil society to provide services to the most marginalized groups and ensure that no one is left behind in the fight against hepatitis.

And finally, 2019 will be a busy year for our members. World Hepatitis Day, on Sunday 28 July 2019, will be a day when the whole community comes together to celebrate the progress we have made to raise awareness of this global killer and to push further action to finally see its elimination. WHA and its members are passionate about making the goal of elimination a reality. For many of our members, this fight is personal because hepatitis has affected them, their loved ones and their communities. This passion is a powerful tool. Around the world WHA members are leading the way in the battle against hepatitis - some with very few resources, just the determination to make a difference. In 2019 we will continue to highlight the exceptional work civil society organizations are doing as we look to harness the power of people living with viral hepatitis to achieve its elimination.