Many more countries with comprehensive hepatitis strategies in place or at least in development

WHO Regional Committee for the Western Pacific adopts Regional Action Plan

Despite the fact that only a quarter of the world’s population live in the Western Pacific region, it bears 40% of global deaths from viral hepatitis, with more than 1,500 lives lost each day. On the second day of the 66th session of the Regional Committee for the Western Pacific in Guam, USA, 12-16 October, Member States recognised the increasing need to tackle hepatitis within the region and approved the Regional Action Plan for Viral Hepatitis 2016-2020. WHO Regional Director for the Western Pacific, Dr Shin Young-soo thanked Member States for assisting in the development of the plan and stated that “with the success of hepatitis B vaccination over the past 15 years, now is the time to move to the next phase in addressing hepatitis and to provide access to timely diagnosis and treatment for the hundreds of millions living with the often devastating consequences of chronic viral hepatitis.” The region has had significant success in fighting hepatitis B thanks to immunization efforts, with the region having met the 2012 milestone of less than 2% chronic hepatitis B prevalence among 5 year old children. 12 countries in the region have also already reached the 2017 target of prevalence at less than 1%. The newly adopted Regional Action Plan goes beyond immunization and includes tools for improved screening, care and treatment. During the session 18 Member States voiced their support for the Action Plan, although stressed that the high price of hepatitis C drugs is still a significant barrier to tackling the disease. The World Hepatitis Alliance (WHA) made a critical intervention when it looked as if Member States wanted to weaken the targets and, as a result, Member States agreed to endorse the proposed targets, including that of diagnosing 90% of all those living with hepatitis B and C by 2030. Dr Gottfried Hirnschall, Director of the WHO HIV/AIDS Department and Global Hepatitis Programme, drew the session to a close by highlighting the World Hepatitis Summit for its role in assisting countries develop and implement national hepatitis strategies.

Calling for proportionate representation of hepatitis organisations at key WHO meetings

In November, hepatitis patient groups, many of which are WHA members, wrote a letter to the WHO asking for increased participation of people living with viral hepatitis at forums related to hepatitis, such as at WHO advisory committees and last year’s hepatitis ‘Partners’ Meeting’. WHO acknowledged the request and reiterated their commitment to tackling viral hepatitis, citing advancements such as the Glasgow Declaration, the proposed global hepatitis targets and the Sustainable Development Goals. Going forward, we will continue to champion the importance of having people living with hepatitis at the centre of discussions.

Providing patient input into WHO testing guidelines

As part of the Guidelines Development Group (GDG), WHA attended a meeting in Geneva 30 September – 2 October to discuss the upcoming hepatitis B and C testing guidelines. The GDG met to review evidence on who to screen and to identify implementation considerations. The guidelines will include real-life examples of innovative testing approaches and WHO are currently running a contest to identify examples. If you have delivered hepatitis B or C testing in an innovative way, find out how you can enter here.
Open letter calling for greater access to life-saving drugs

On 2 November, WHA launched an open letter calling for immediate action to vastly improve access to life-saving drugs for viral hepatitis. Signed by over 120 organisations from 55 countries, the letter makes specific requests to national governments and pharmaceutical companies, including addressing the stigma that prevents people getting tested, improving access to diagnostics and ensuring drugs are affordable in all countries. Signatures were collected from delegates at the World Hepatitis Summit and the letter was supported by patient advocates, public health specialists, activists, and representatives from governments and WHO. It sends a clear message that the global hepatitis community has had enough of the barriers that prevent millions of people accessing treatment and it is time to act to save hundreds of thousands of lives every year. It has been sent to all governments and to all pharmaceutical and diagnostics companies working in the field of hepatitis. We encourage our member organisations to use the letter to lobby their national governments.

Advising Georgia on its hepatitis C elimination programme

In April 2015, Georgia launched an ambitious hepatitis C elimination programme. Now with over 3,000 people on treatment, Georgia is scaling up capacity to meet high demand and is developing a comprehensive plan with specific goals and activities. WHA was invited to attend a meeting in Tbilisi, Georgia on 3 and 4 November as part of the Hepatitis C Technical Advisory Group (HepCTAG) with the purpose of advising the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs on the goals, policies, implementation strategies, and monitoring and evaluation practices of the programme.

Reports highlighting the success of the World Hepatitis Summit

In November WHA published two reports summarising discussions and outcomes from the World Hepatitis Summit and the Pre-Summit Member Conference. The report ‘Building Momentum, Making the Case’ captures the key points and issues raised from the Summit and includes best-practice examples and the most up-to-date knowledge to support the development of national plans. The Pre-Summit Member Conference Summary Report details what was covered in sessions at the exclusive WHA member-only event that took place ahead of the Summit and summarises the members’ feedback from the meeting. The reports are useful reference documents for policy-makers and patient advocates alike and can be used in national advocacy discussions. Read the ‘Building Momentum, Making the Case’ report here and Pre-Summit Member Conference Summary Report here.

Ensuring civil society participation in national strategies in the Americas

Following the adoption of the regional action plan, WHA members in the Americas region took the initiative to unite and write to Dr Carrissa F. Etienne, Director of the Pan American Health Organization, expressing their support for the approval of the plan and highlighting the critical role civil society have to play in the development, implementation and follow up of national strategies. WHA members emphasised their willingness to contribute to these efforts and work with governments and international agencies to eliminate viral hepatitis in the region.

Increased influence of the Alliance and its members

Showcasing WHA’s work to supporters at AASLD The Liver Meeting

From 13 to 17 November, WHA attended the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases’ Liver Meeting 2015 in San Francisco, USA. Over 9,500 hepatologists and hepatology health professionals from around the world attend the meeting every year so it provides an ideal platform to promote the work of WHA through meetings with many of WHA’s supporters.
Building a global elimination movement

In May 2016, WHO Member States are set to adopt the Global Health Sector Strategy on Viral Hepatitis, which includes ambitious targets to eliminate hepatitis by 2030. This is a milestone for hepatitis, and is a key opportunity for the community to launch a global elimination movement. On 28 October, WHA President, Charles Gore, and WHA Executive Board Member for the Americas Region and Medical Director at Center for Asian Health at Saint Barnabas Medical Center, Su Wang, joined moderator Dr Chari Cohen, Director of Public Health at the Hepatitis B Foundation for a webinar on building an advocacy movement. Charles Gore provided an overview of the history of WHA, what patient advocacy in hepatitis has achieved so far and what the global elimination movement hopes to accomplish while Su Wang discussed how WHA member organisations can work together to strengthen advocacy efforts. If you missed the live webinar session or want to share the information with your network, a video recording and the presentation slides are available online here.

Innovative patent agreement shows success of patient advocacy

In November, the Medicines Patent Pool (MPP) announced that they would be expanding their mandate to include hepatitis C medicines and issued its first licence, for a hepatitis C drug, signing an agreement with Bristol-Myers Squibb (BMS) for daclatasvir. Following a six-month dialogue with patient groups, civil society and other stakeholders, the royalty-free licence will enable generic manufacture of the drug for sale in 112 low- and middle-income countries. We congratulate MPP and BMS for recognising the global hepatitis community’s call for essential medicines at affordable prices. We believe the agreement signals an important move into greater access to treatment across the globe and shows how powerful patient advocacy can be.

Expanding our membership base

In this quarter the membership base of the WHA once again grew as we welcomed another four organisations: Natural Initiative for Voluntary Blood Donors (NIVBLODON), Cameroon; CAZAS (Montenegrin Association against AIDS), Montenegro; Coalition on Positive Health Empowerment (COPE), USA; Canadian AIDS Society, Canada. WHA’s membership is now composed of 225 members in 81 countries across the world. We are always actively looking for new members as further expanding this network helps to create greater unity and cooperation among the global hepatitis community, which is fundamental to efforts in tackling the global hepatitis epidemic.

View all WHA member organisations here and find out how you can become a member on the website.

Uniting patients for Patient Solidarity Day

On 5 December, patients across the globe united to mark Patient Solidarity Day and reaffirm that healthcare is a human right. Co-ordinated by the International Alliance of Patient Organizations (IAPO), the day encourages patient groups to come together to host events that raise awareness and urge decision-makers to meet patients’ human right of access to timely, acceptable, and affordable healthcare of appropriate quality. As an organisation that is patient-led and patient-driven, the WHA fully supports an initiative that alerts the world’s attention to the importance of patient-centred healthcare. The power of patients joining together is an undeniable force and nowhere was this clearer than during the World Hepatitis Summit earlier this year. Since this unique meeting of over 150 patient organisation representatives, a renewed commitment has been made between WHA and its members to call on governments to recognise basic human rights and ensure that essential medicines are available to all at affordable prices.
Greatly increased profile of viral hepatitis

Highlighting the importance of early diagnosis for European HIV-Hepatitis Testing Week

On 27 November, WHA joined the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, the European AIDS Treatment Group and the organisers of European HIV-Hepatitis Testing Week for a live Twitter chat. Using the hashtag #Time2test, contributors responded to questions on the benefits of early diagnosis, where to get tested and groups at-risk of viral hepatitis. Over 43,000 people were reached during the chat, greatly increasing awareness of the importance of getting tested.

Stressing the impact of HIV hepatitis co-infection on World AIDS Day

On World AIDS Day, WHA called for increased recognition of viral hepatitis and HIV co-infections. Issuing a press release to global media on 1 December, WHA stressed the serious health threat hepatitis B and C pose to people living with HIV. Today it is estimated that approximately 15% of people living with HIV are affected by hepatitis B or C, resulting in a global burden of over 5 million. With a large percentage of people living with HIV and viral hepatitis still often undiagnosed, it will be impossible to reach the WHO’s goal of ending the AIDS epidemic by 2030, without a huge scale-up in testing and treatment of both HIV and hepatitis. In the release WHA identified key measures that must be taken by governments, healthcare professionals and civil society groups to address the issue.

Launch of World Hepatitis Day Summary Report

With over 900 events taking place in 159 countries across the world, World Hepatitis Day (WHD) 2015 was a resounding success. The fifth official WHD took place along the theme of ‘Prevent hepatitis: It’s up to you’ and received support from 86 national governments as well as celebrities, civil society, private corporation, the media and the general public. To celebrate the success of WHD 2015 and showcase activities organised by WHA members, WHA has launched the WHD Summary Report, which can be downloaded here.

Increasing the WHA communications team

Recognising the importance of increasing the profile of viral hepatitis, and the value of a co-ordinated communications strategy, we have employed a full-time Communications Manager. Tara Farrell joined the team in November bringing a wealth of experience having worked for Weber Shandwick, a global communications agency, for a number of philanthropic and Not for Profit clients, including the World Heart Federation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Tara brings great enthusiasm and experience, especially around campaign development, which will be crucial for a successful 2016.

Hepatology, Medicine and Policy journal

WHA is affiliated with Hepatology, Medicine and Policy, an open access peer reviewed journal that includes articles on the prevention and management of viral and non-viral hepatitis and other liver disorders. It emphasises the translation of evidence into action, in part by encouraging authors to present findings in ways that are meaningful to policy-makers, advocates and community members. We has been working closely with the journal to develop topical materials in order to galvanise the global public health response. The journal is expected to start publishing in 2016 and welcomes submissions. If you have any queries about the journal, please see the journal website or contact hepatolmedpolicy@biomedcentral.com