We must invest in viral hepatitis

World Hepatitis Day: message from the President

WHA holds first face-to-face workshop for Find the Missing Millions In-country Advocacy Programme

Meet WHA's newest members

hepinion: We must invest in viral hepatitis
NOTE FROM OUR CEO

As with many of you, the WHA team are busy preparing for World Hepatitis Day. It’s been wonderful to see how many people are planning activities this year and I’m sure this year will be one to remember. There’s still time to get involved and tell us what you are doing at www.worldhepatitisday.org.

This month WHA welcomed the five members working with us on the Find the Missing Millions In-country Advocacy Programme to London. We were delighted to be joined by the members and leading stakeholders at the meeting, which was a real success. Each of the five members is developing exciting projects that will accelerate hepatitis elimination efforts in their communities. We will let you know more about their plans in the coming months. Work has also been continuing in India and Cambodia, where we are working with partners and governments to undertake the investment case for viral hepatitis elimination. WHA Head of Programmes, Jessica Hicks, has written a hepinion piece on the need for investment in viral hepatitis which you can read on page 12.

I was delighted to have the opportunity to meet more of our members this month at the 5th annual HIV/Viral Hepatitis Co-infection meeting held ahead of IAS in Mexico. I’m always inspired by the WHA members that I meet and the role civil society plays in accelerating action on viral hepatitis. We are looking to showcase more of that work in the coming months so please get in touch if you would like your work featured on our platforms.

I would like to wish you all the very best for World Hepatitis Day and I hope you can join us to Find the Missing Millions. I am looking forward to seeing the results of all your hard work in due course.

Cary James

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Want to contribute?
We welcome your contributions so please get in touch at contact@worldhepatitisalliance.org to have your news and stories included in future issues and feel free to share this magazine with your network.
Abdullah said, “We also want General Datuk Dr Noor Hisham as preventing new cases of the virus. Health Director—has additional targets such as with hepatitis C, the campaign along with treating people living with hepatitis C in the country. Malaysia. It is estimated that there are over 400,000 people living with hepatitis C in the country. The campaign, which is part of preparations for World Hepatitis Day on 28 July, includes over 100 specifically designed screening sites in hospitals and primary healthcare centres across Malaysia. It is estimated that there are over 400,000 people living with hepatitis C in the country.

Along with treating people with hepatitis C, the campaign has additional targets such as preventing new cases of the virus. Health Director-General Datuk Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said, “We also want Malaysians to understand the risk factors of hepatitis C, so that we can tackle the health burden in this country and prevent new cases from occurring.

“This initiative is the biggest national screening event ever attempted by our government and will play a significant role in our hepatitis C elimination efforts by 2030. This campaign will also help to support and accelerate the scale-up activities of hepatitis C screening in-country,” he added.

Read more here and follow the campaign on Twitter by searching #MYmissingmillions.

Uganda becomes first African country to reach WHO’s 2020 targets of tackling hepatitis B

A new scorecard tracking the progress against hepatitis B in Africa revealed Uganda is the first country to reach and surpass the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) 2020 target of ensuring access, treatment and awareness raising of the viral infection. More than four million people in Uganda have been screened to date. Since 2015, Uganda has invested $3 million annually on a free hepatitis B screening programme and conducted a community mobilisation and sensitisation drive on the disease.

“More than 30% of the population who are infected with hepatitis B are now aware of their status and can have access to free medical care, making Uganda the first country in Africa to surpass the 2020 target of 20%,” notes the WHO scorecard.

Along with Uganda, Rwanda have also been applauded for their efforts to eliminate hepatitis.

“Only Rwanda (hepatitis C) and Uganda (hepatitis B) have started free nationwide screening as a decentralised service, and are on track to reach the 2020 target for screening and community awareness,” says WHO.

Every year, more than 200,000 people in Africa die from complications of hepatitis B and C. The WHO scorecard revealed that only three of the 47 countries are on track to eliminate viral hepatitis.

Read more here.

Program in Canada helps recently released prisoners living with hepatitis C

A pilot program with the aim to ensure recently released inmates with a history of injection drug use are screened and treated for hepatitis C has been launched in Calgary, Canada.

“It takes a lot of willpower and effort on the released inmates’ end to come out of this. And if we don’t provide them with enough support, they’re not going to be able to,” said Monty Ghosh, a University of Alberta professor.

Through this program, people who have recently been released from prison can connect with “peer navigators”. The navigators have lived through similar experiences and they accompany the former inmates to medical, legal and social services appointments.

Read more here.

Hepatitis is regularly making the news thanks to the efforts of WHA members. Here are a few highlights.

Free nationwide screening campaign in Malaysia

In the biggest national screening campaign ever attempted in the country, Malaysia aims to test and treat its population for hepatitis C, free of charge.

The campaign, which is part of preparations for World Hepatitis Day on 28 July, includes over 100 specifically designed screening sites in hospitals and primary healthcare centres across Malaysia. It is estimated that there are over 400,000 people living with hepatitis C in the country.

Participating in a hepatitis-related activity or have an event planned? Email us or contact us on social media.
World Hepatitis Day
Message From The President

Ahead of World Hepatitis Day, World Hepatitis Alliance President Michael Ninburg sends this personal message to members and supporters everywhere.

World Hepatitis Day is the one day when the world unites to celebrate the progress made towards the elimination of viral hepatitis. Progress that has only been possible thanks to you, the community of people affected by viral hepatitis. This is the day to combine our voices to raise awareness for the 325 million people living with hepatitis B and hepatitis C.

World Hepatitis Day also gives us time to pause and reflect on the countless lives lost to viral hepatitis. 1.4 million people die each year because of these diseases, despite there being a vaccine and effective treatment for hepatitis B and a cure for hepatitis C. It is important to look beyond that hard statistic and remember that each person was an individual - a friend, a family member, a colleague, a loved one. Every single one of those deaths was preventable.

"Millions of lives are still at risk simply because people are unaware that they are living with viral hepatitis."

Millions of lives are still at risk simply because people are unaware that they are living with viral hepatitis. This year on World Hepatitis Day, the World Hepatitis Alliance is encouraging you to help Find the Missing Millions - those people living with viral hepatitis who remain undiagnosed. To do this we need to raise awareness and to encourage people to get tested. World Hepatitis Day provides the platform to spread the message that viral hepatitis is a global health crisis, but one that can be overcome. With a concerted multi-stakeholder effort that includes engagement with those affected by viral hepatitis we can ensure that no one is left behind and achieve elimination.

In 2016, every country in the world committed to eliminating viral hepatitis by 2030. Since then, 124 countries have developed, or are developing, elimination strategies. Yet many of these strategies do not have dedicated funding. Achieving hepatitis elimination by 2030 will require a major increase in funding for hepatitis prevention, testing and treatment services, as well as including hepatitis services in Universal Health Coverage efforts.

We have the tools to eliminate these diseases and we are fighting for the resources. I believe that together, we will achieve the elimination of viral hepatitis. And it is my sincere hope that World Hepatitis Day serves as a catalyst for action.

Whatever you have planned to recognize this day, your actions will help to save lives. That cannot be commended highly enough.

Thank you for your commitment and we wish you a very successful World Hepatitis Day!

Michael Ninburg
President

"We have the tools to eliminate these diseases and we are fighting for the resources."
MEET WHA'S NEW MEMBERS

WHA has recently welcomed six new members to the organisation which now represents 281 members across 91 countries. Meet them here.

TAIWAN HEPATITIS INFORMATION & CARE ASSOCIATION (THICA) - CHINESE TAIPEI (TAINAN)

Taiwan Hepatitis Information and Care Association (THICA) was formed by 51 viral hepatitis patients who decided to establish a patient association after cross-sharing knowledge on social media platforms for years. Their mission is to share the latest information on viral hepatitis, promote awareness, prevention and treatment of the disease, and link patients to appropriate medical care. THICA has almost 10,000 followers on Facebook and a strong Twitter following and presence. Follow them on Facebook and Twitter.

CRISTAL HEALTHLINE FOUNDATION - GHANA

Cristal Healthline Foundation’s vision is to tackle and rid Ghana of viral hepatitis through awareness raising and immunisation practices. They also provide support for those affected by the disease. They have conducted screening and vaccination activities on World Hepatitis Day since 2016, focusing on rural areas of Ghana. Follow them on Facebook.

KINGS HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE - NIGERIA

King's Health and Development Initiative’s mission is to reduce the burden of viral hepatitis in Nigeria through advocacy, community sensitisation, patient support, and capacity building of health workers. Their activities include training and mentoring healthcare professionals and supporting communities to help them implement and sustain health development programmes.

THE LIVER FOUNDATION - PAKISTAN

As part of the 130-year-old international movement “United Way”, The Liver Foundation is based in Pakistan and part of the Al-Rehman International Trust, which has provided free community services and medical treatment to those in need since 2003. The Liver Foundation has a specialised clinic to treat all liver diseases, in particular hepatitis B, C, D and E. In cooperation with major hospitals in Karachi, they provide patients with access to medicines, qualified doctors, and laboratory test facilities. Moving forward, the organisation aims to fund Medical Mobile Units to test and treat people in the poorest areas around Karachi.

KEELUNG ASSOCIATION FOR LIVER DISEASE PREVENTION AND CONTROL - CHINESE TAIPEI (TAINAN)

Keelung Association for Liver Disease Prevention and Control is based in Chinese Taipei (Taiwan). Their vision is to contribute to the elimination of viral hepatitis through raising awareness of the disease, promoting treatment, establishing support groups, holding screenings, cooperating with researchers, and promoting an emergency rescue plan for liver disease. They have recently been conducting screening activities in fishing villages, ensuring to transfer those living with chronic hepatitis to hospitals. Follow them on Facebook.

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF LIVER PATIENTS AND TRANSPLANTS FNETH - SPAIN

Spanish-based National Federation of Liver Patients and Transplants (FNETH) works to raise awareness amongst the public about the importance of organ donation and the early detection and prevention of all liver diseases. They carry out campaigns to publicise all aspects of liver diseases and the different ways of treating patients. They aim to become the reference organisation in Spain for liver transplant patients and their families. Follow them on Facebook and Twitter.
Earlier this month, participants in the World Hepatitis Alliance's (WHA) Find the Missing Millions In-country Advocacy Programme came together for the project’s first face-to-face meeting in London.

The aim of the meeting was to help the programme participants identify the barriers to diagnosis within their country which they felt they could most impact, and start to develop advocacy strategies to overcome them”, said Jessica Hicks, WHA’s Head of Programmes.

Participating organisations were joined by global experts at the meeting. This provided a forum to share experiences, learn from their peers and other stakeholders and build their capacity across a wide range of topics. Expert stakeholders such as Dr John Ward from the Coalition for Global Hepatitis Elimination, Giten Khwairakpam from TREAT Asia amfAR, Rachel Halford from the Hepatitis C Trust, and Dr Naranbaatar Dashdorj from Onom Foundation brought a wealth of experience to the meeting, as well as unique insights that helped to enhance discussions and the meeting outcomes.

“From this meeting, I have learnt a lot and shared our work. It will help modify and shape our Find the Missing Millions campaign,” says Professor Mohammad Ali, National Liver Foundation of Bangladesh.

Providing the participants with the chance to start developing their in-country advocacy projects for the programme, and giving them the opportunity to receive feedback from the stakeholders in the room, the meeting’s sessions helped build attendees’ strategic thinking and encouraged them to use the patient voice more effectively.

“Having a coalition of different expertise is really important for us to learn from each other”, said Caroline Thomas, Yayasan Koalisi Satu Hati. “When I talk about Indonesia, it’s not just about Indonesia. We can learn from other countries and experts too. For example, our micro-elimination prison programme didn’t originate with us. The idea came from India. Working together we will eliminate viral hepatitis”.

“Being a part of this programme and having the chance to learn from others means a lot to our organisation. I am excited for the next steps,” added Shelly-Anne Myrie, Caribbean Hepatitis C Alliance.

WHA looks forward to continuing to work with the five programme participants as they further develop and then implement their advocacy strategies.
We Must Invest in Viral Hepatitis

By Jessica Hicks, Head of Programmes at World Hepatitis Alliance

Earlier this year JHEP released an article entitled ‘Global progress on the elimination of viral hepatitis as a major public health threat: An analysis of WHO Member State responses 2017’. Encouragingly, the article concludes that countries are making progress with respect to national hepatitis planning. However, there remains a major issue: financing.

The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that, as of April 2019, 124 countries have developed, or are in the process of developing, national plans and strategies. However many of these plans lack dedicated funding, and the 2017 data analysed in JHEP’s article shows that only 58 per cent of the 82 reported low- and middle-income countries had, at the time, included domestic funding in their national hepatitis plans.

For us to have any hope of reaching elimination, major investment in viral hepatitis programmes is required. WHO are seeking to address this critical gap in funding with their theme for this year’s World Hepatitis Day: “Invest in eliminating hepatitis”. Through this theme, WHO aims to urge national and regional policymakers to increase political and financial commitments for the hepatitis response, to encourage national governments to ensure that national hepatitis testing and treatment plans include dedicated funding and investment, and to seek optimal prices for medicines and diagnostics.

While the World Hepatitis Alliance (WHA) echoes this call to policymakers to address the funding crisis, it is important to note that we, as civil society organisations, can play a pivotal role in securing adequate investment for hepatitis elimination programmes. The “global progress” article reveals that not only are countries whose governments engaged with civil society more advanced in their national planning efforts, they are also significantly more likely to have a funded plan. 52 per cent of countries whose governments have drawn on the expertise of civil society have plans with dedicated funding, compared to just 23 per cent of countries where civil society has not been engaged. The fact that countries who have involved civil society are more than twice as likely to have funded plans is a real testament to the know-how and strength of civil society, and we call on all countries faced with the challenge of how to finance their elimination plans – after all, as highlighted in the JHEP article, 82 per cent of people with hepatitis B or hepatitis C currently live in countries where there is either no national plan, or no dedicated funding identified to implement a plan. Without investing in hepatitis, millions of lives will continue to be lost and countries will continue to face the huge financial burden of disease management costs.

This is not good enough.

At WHA, we are working hard to promote the strong case for funding national viral hepatitis plans – after all, as highlighted in the JHEP article, 82 per cent of people with hepatitis B or hepatitis C currently live in countries where there is either no national plan, or no dedicated funding identified to implement a plan. Without investing in hepatitis, millions of lives will continue to be lost and countries will continue to face the huge financial burden of disease management costs.

As well as engaging with civil society, governments need to take a strategic approach to costing and financing their viral hepatitis programmes, and one tool which can help guide them in this is the National Viral Hepatitis Programme Financing Strategy Template which WHA developed. This template explores each of the steps required as part of a comprehensive financing process and reflects the work we are doing in countries to support governments to cost, create the investment case and explore financing options for their viral hepatitis plans. Working with governments, local civil society organisations, and external stakeholders, we have completed or are working on costing national viral elimination plans in four countries across Africa, Asia, and South America.

Each scenario explored in our costing and investment work in Nigeria (conservative, moderate or aggressive scale-up of elimination activities) found projected cost savings compared to taking no action. And it’s about more than money – all scenarios also showed a dramatic reduction in infection and deaths from end-stage liver disease. As this particular case study demonstrates, investing in hepatitis elimination would save money in the long run, and save tens of thousands of lives each year.

In response to the challenges countries are facing in funding their elimination plans, our work goes a step beyond simply creating the investment case to look at the different options for funding that plan. Importantly, these discussions must be embedded within the context of Universal Health Coverage (UHC), though for those countries that are working towards UHC, or are not able to fund all the areas of their programme in this way, catalytic financing strategies may be required.

SPOTLIGHT ON: HEPATITIS AND UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE (UHC)

WHO’s recent costing analysis reveals that additional funding of US$6 billion per year will be needed in low- and middle-income countries between 2016 and 2030 in order to achieve hepatitis elimination targets, but only US$0.5 billion was invested in 2016. This investment would increase the global health price tag by 1.5 per cent. But it will bring greater returns on better general health outcomes as well as future cost savings; funding hepatitis testing and treatment services as part of UHC efforts could cut global deaths by five per cent and increase healthy life years by ten per cent by 2030. These are achievements that cannot be ignored, and it is essential that viral hepatitis is given the same recognition as HIV/AIDS, malaria and TB in UHC planning.
In the lead up to World Hepatitis Day we will be sharing the experiences of the people and organisations that use the day to help Find the Missing Millions.

In 2018 LiveWell Initiative (LWI) marked WHD with an advocacy walk which raised awareness of viral hepatitis, and resulted in many people being tested for the disease at a temporary screening centre.

The inspiration to organise an advocacy walk for World Hepatitis Day (WHD) 2018 came from the global WHD 2018 theme, #FindtheMissingMillions. We found that the only way to drive home the message was to start by sensitising people in a way that ensures that they are immediately engaged, and we thought that the walk was the perfect way to do this. Our plan was to have an Advocacy Walk, engaging the people, and immediately giving them access to screening and vaccination to sustain their enthusiasm.

The first step we took to organise the walk was to mobilize partners and collaborators. To this end, we approached World Health Organization (WHO) Officials, Ministry of Health Officials and Pharmaceutical companies. They all cooperated, even though the fact that our walk was on WHD meant it coincided with their own programmes. We succeeded in getting the blessing of the Nigerian Government and endorsement of WHO, and we were given approval to use a Government-run open field for the event. At least four pharmaceutical companies partnered with us. Each collaborator had a key role to play, and it was a win-win collaboration for all.

Not as many people as we had expected joined the walk. However we discovered that this was because people were more concerned about informing others as quickly as possible about the need to get tested, than joining the walk. Because of this, a crowd built up at the Screening Point – a sports centre. Luckily, we had enough staffers, volunteers and partners to run an impactful walk.

The general public initially responded to the walk by saying to themselves: “just another walk”. However what stirred up their interest was the title; they wanted to know what millions were missing and we would stop to explain to people. This aroused their interest and helped to build up the anticipated crowd for screening and eventual vaccination.

The walk was so impactful that almost all the meatsellers/herdsmen in a nearby abattoir came to be screened. Without the walk, the impact of the programme would have been less.

To spread the Advocacy messages during the walk, we gave out flyers and educational leaflets, and we carried message placards which were nicely designed. The banners were preceded by a giant banner which also carried the Find the Missing Millions message.

I would advise other organisations wanting to organise an advocacy walk for WHD to plan, organise, direct and coordinate their programmes carefully and not at random. There has to be a strategy, it needs to be tested, and they must be pragmatic enough to understand the need to tailor such a programme towards the needs of the people. There is a need to carry the people along, as they are the key stakeholders. Community Leaders should be approached prior to the programme date so that they will also assist in mobilizing the community.

An Advocacy Walk should not be organised in isolation; it is a ‘see-me’ programme, but after seeing you, the public needs you to offer them something to hold on to, like screening, vaccination and linkages to care. We recommend that Advocacy Programmes should ideally be preceded by either an outdoor walk or an indoor seminar, and should be concluded by screening, vaccination, and linkage to care.

At LiveWell Initiative (LWI) and at Women in Hepatitis Africa (WIHA), our approach is very clear. We have adopted the ‘Screen and Vaccinate’ policy and we refer people who test positive for further confirmatory diagnosis through our hepatologists and linkages to care. The vaccinations are offered at affordable prices (up to 50 per cent discount), and the screening is free.

With this way of doing things the impact will be measurable, sustainable and the programme is scalable in all economies.

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**TOP TIPS FOR SUCCESS**

- Collaborate with other stakeholders (e.g. your local Ministry of Health) for maximum impact.
- Make sure you have eye-catching banners and handouts with clear messages.
- Plan ahead and have a strategy.
- Don’t hold a walk in isolation – link it with a screening and vaccination event.

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With this way of doing things the impact will be measurable, sustainable and the programme is scalable in all economies."
To mark World Hepatitis Day 2018, Fédération SOS Hépatites from France created a social media campaign with the hashtag #DuBruitContreHépatitesC. This is how they reached over 96 million people with their message.

Hepatitis C is a silent disease. In France, we estimate that around 75,000 people live with this disease unaware. If not detected in time, it can destroy patients’ livers and lead to cirrhosis or cancer.

When starting preparations for our campaign we asked ourselves, how can we fight the silence that surrounds hepatitis C? The answer soon came to us. Of course, noise! We quickly decided that the aim of our campaign would be to make lots of noise about hepatitis C by informing people about the virus and how it is transmitted, and encouraging people to get tested. We also determined that social media would be the best platform from which to amplify our message.

We got in contact with an agency to help us create our social media campaign.

They developed three key messages for us to promote on social media.

- **75,000 French people are unaware that they are infected with viral hepatitis.**
- **Hepatitis C concerns everybody.**
- **Effective cures for hepatitis C exist today.**

Together, we then came up with the hashtag #DuBruitContreHépatitesC (#NoiseAgainstHepatitisC) to spread these messages, linking them to a simple call to action: book an appointment with your doctor and get tested.

From there, we worked with the agency to identify our key audiences. From data collected by the French Hepatology Association, we identified these groups as: women with children born in the 1980s; women aged over 45; people who frequent tattoo parlours; people living with HIV and; people who inject drugs.

To best reach our audiences we primarily based our campaign on Facebook, as our audiences were mainly older and we were reaching out to a wide range of people. They also recommended that we use LinkedIn to reach and educate healthcare professionals.

On Facebook we strived to fuel conversations on hepatitis C, answering people’s questions, showcasing our field work and putting people in contact with medical professionals. On LinkedIn, we provided healthcare professionals with key information about our campaign, hepatitis C, and how to test people.

The campaign was a great success. It was picked up by national media and our total online reach was 96 million people over four months.

For a successful social media campaign it’s not enough to have an important and relevant topic, you must also capture your audience’s imagination. We worked to make our campaign both remarkable and memorable.”

**TOP TIPS FOR SUCCESS**

- **Think about who your target audience is and why they should listen to your campaign.**
- **Choose a campaign title that will resonate.**
- **Think about how the campaign will help the general development of your organisation and its aims.**
HOW TO Find The Missing Millions on World Hepatitis Day

Last World Hepatitis Day SOS Hépatites Burkina hosted a press conference to launch the Find the Missing Millions campaign. They invited broadcast, print and online media, amplifying their message to the public to get tested and calling on all stakeholders to intensify their efforts in the fight against hepatitis. This is how they did it.

“To mark WHD last year we launched the Find the Missing Millions (FMM) campaign. As we wanted to spread the messages of the campaign far and wide, we decided to hold a press conference at the launch. The media is one of the best ways to reach different sections of the general public.”

In Burkina Faso, requests for media coverage incurs fees. Instead, we therefore sent newsletters to the media outlets informing them of the launch event and outlining the timeline of the press conference. We also included a programme of our WHD activities.

On the day itself, twenty-four journalists turned up. We registered them and made sure everyone had received the day’s schedule. We wanted to make sure that the journalists present would find the press conference engaging. We therefore held the press conference on the official launch day of our FMM campaign and activities. Our President presented on why we should find the missing millions. And a nationally-celebrated hepato-gastroenterologist presented on the state of play of hepatitis B and C in Burkina Faso.

We found that getting a celebrity on board also helped boost media interest and so we invited a Burkinabe music star to join our press conference. She got screened for viral hepatitis in front of the press to send the message out that everyone should get tested. She also appealed to the authorities to offer the hepatitis B vaccination to all new-borns, and to make sure screening and testing facilities are available across the country.

When all the presentations and discussions were over, we opened the floor to questions and the journalists conducted interviews.

Following the press conference the campaign was relayed by almost all the media outlets present, meaning our messages reached populations across our country.

Whilst obtaining press coverage and media interest can be expensive in our country, it is crucial for social mobilisation and generating real political change.


Top tips for success
• Send press releases to the media as well as inviting them to a press conference.
• Ensure you have speakers and activities that are worth media attention.
• Ensure there is an opportunity for questions and individual interviews.”
Together, our stories can change the way the world sees viral hepatitis. The stories of those living with or impacted by viral hepatitis can help educate and raise awareness, provide support and inspiration, tackle stigma and discrimination, and highlight the true impact of this global disease.

Each month we share the story of someone whose life has been affected by viral hepatitis. This month, we hear from Philip Baldwin from the UK.

"I really did feel that I was alone."

I was just 24 years old when I was diagnosed with HIV and hepatitis C. I was diagnosed with HIV over my lunch break from work, then a week later I was told I also had hepatitis C. It came as a complete shock, and this double whammy had a huge impact on my life. I felt fear, shame, grief, and anger.

I had no physical symptoms of hepatitis. I had been accessing STI testing from the age of 17 and always aimed to have safe sex. Because I was tested regularly, this meant that the viruses were diagnosed early on and I was able to access treatment as soon as possible.

Emotionally, though, hepatitis C had a huge impact on me and I felt the stigma of my diagnosis acutely. Having been diagnosed with both HIV and hepatitis C, I had to deal with the dual stigma of being co-infected. I felt alienated from HIV negative men on account of my HIV, and I felt alienated from HIV positive men on account of my hepatitis C. I didn’t know where or how to fit in. I felt isolated. I really did feel that I was alone.

The year of my diagnoses was particularly difficult. During this time, I contemplated taking my life on three occasions. What pulled me back was thinking about the impact that this would have on my family and friends. I attended support groups where I met with other people living with HIV and hepatitis C. Hearing about their journeys really helped me come to terms with being HIV and hepatitis C positive, and I was able to gain objectivity and learn more about the viruses. This objectivity allowed me to slowly gain more acceptance around my diagnoses.

Though it took me a number of years to come to terms with my hepatitis C, once I had achieved it, I really wanted to speak out because there is a real lack of awareness around the virus. In 2014, I started writing for the Huffington Post (a popular online magazine) and in 2015, I left my job as a lawyer in the City of London to concentrate full time on my activism. I’m now a gay rights, and human rights activist and a writer. Ultimately, my diagnoses empowered me and I really wouldn’t be the person that I am today if it hadn’t been for them.

I accessed treatment for hepatitis C in December 2016. I found the 12-week treatment to be side-effect free and it was an amazing feeling when I cleared the infection. It felt like a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I no longer had to worry about the potential health consequences of hepatitis C.

I think that it is really important that we find the many people who are living with viral hepatitis but are undiagnosed. We need to dramatically increase testing and, in my view, we need to aim to move testing beyond prisons, beyond substance misuse services, beyond sexual health clinics. It needs to become the norm that people are tested. This would help break down stigma surrounding the disease, too.

Follow Philip on Twitter at @philipcbaldwin

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