Regional Director’s message on World Hepatitis Day, 28 July 2014

Viral hepatitis kills approximately half a million people every year in the WHO South-East Asia Region. Most of these deaths are preventable. Nearly 100 million people in the Region are currently estimated to be infected with hepatitis B, and 30 million live with chronic hepatitis C infection. On World Hepatitis Day, 28 July, WHO and global health partners renew their commitment to fight hepatitis in our communities.

Viral hepatitis B and C are the most common cause of liver cirrhosis and cancer. Hepatitis A and E are endemic to South-East Asia and most people here are infected during childhood due to contaminated drinking water and food and lack of access to proper sanitation. Though a vaccine against hepatitis A is available, it is not widely used by the countries in the Region as a public health intervention.

All Member States of the Region, however, have included hepatitis B vaccines in their immunization programmes for children. Indonesia and Thailand use the tetravalent form, and other countries use the pentavalent form of the vaccine. An additional birth dose is administered in Bhutan, The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Maldives and Thailand. More than 24 million doses of the hepatitis vaccine are being administered in the Region annually.

Promising developments in hepatitis treatment and prevention have led to increased interest in the global hepatitis response. Member States acknowledged viral hepatitis as a global public health problem and called for a comprehensive approach to its prevention and control at the Sixty-third World Health Assembly in 2010 through a resolution. On 22 May 2014, the Sixty-seventh World Health Assembly approved a resolution aiming to improve the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of viral hepatitis. The resolution highlights the importance of expanding hepatitis A and B vaccination programmes and considers a range of measures to strengthen infection control and improve access to quality and affordable medicines and diagnostics.
There are several challenges to translating these resolutions into action in the Region. In most countries, surveillance systems for viral hepatitis are inadequate and do not enable evidence-based policy decisions. Preventive measures are not universally implemented. Treatment for hepatitis is costly and not widely available. While there are new medicines that bring the promise of cure, such treatments come at a significant cost. A combination of approaches is essential for the price of the new hepatitis medicines to become affordable in low and middle-income countries. Provision and integration of viral hepatitis services into settings that serve high-risk populations is also challenging. Administration of treatment on a larger scale would need the expansion of the role of primary health care and training of primary health-care personnel.

Since hepatitis viruses differ in their distribution and routes of transmission, we must adopt coordinated national strategies based on the local epidemiological context. The battle against hepatitis cannot be won by ministries of health alone. These national strategies must have the buy-in of other sectors. Most importantly, the public must be armed with information to prevent viral hepatitis. Special attention needs to be paid to the prevention of perinatal transmission through the birth dose of hepatitis B vaccine. Unless we improve food and drinking water safety and sanitation, we will not be able to control this disease. National blood donation systems must enforce quality-assured screening of all donated blood, tissues and organs for the prevention of HIV, hepatitis B, hepatitis C and syphilis transmission. National policies also need to provide equitable access to prevention, diagnosis and treatment for people affected by viral hepatitis. And we need to strengthen infection control in health-care settings.

On World Hepatitis Day, WHO reiterates its commitment to continued policy support, resource mobilization and technical support to enable Member States to adopt national strategies for the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of viral hepatitis.

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