Message from

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Since 2011, World Hepatitis Day has provided a unique opportunity for communities all over the world to focus much-needed attention on a major global health threat: hepatitis. Viral hepatitis, which is caused by infection with hepatitis viruses (usually A, B, C and E), has often been overshadowed, in the public eye, by other infectious diseases. But, in fact, it causes a tremendous burden – it affects more than 2 billion people globally. It can also lead to severe complications and liver cancer, and can inflict a huge economic burden on the affected individual, the family as well as the health system. Recognizing this, in May 2010, the World Health Assembly adopted a resolution (WHA63.18) that called for the development and implementation of comprehensive prevention and control strategies for viral hepatitis.

This is particularly important in the WHO South-East Asia Region, where a 100 million people are currently estimated to be living with hepatitis B, and 30 million people with hepatitis C. The majority of them will remain unaware of their infection, due to the complete absence of symptoms in the early stages of the disease, until they might get symptoms of cirrhosis or a type of liver cancer known as hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), many years later. This Region also has a high burden of hepatitis A and E. Hepatitis E, particularly, leads to high mortality in pregnant women. In the next 10 years, viral hepatitis could claim 5 million lives in the Region, according to some estimates.

The impact goes beyond health. Because hepatitis affects people in the prime of their lives, it leads to decreased productivity. It also places a heavy burden on the health system due to the cost of treating liver failure and chronic liver disease. In many countries, viral hepatitis is the leading cause of liver transplants, the cost of which can run into hundreds of thousands of dollars per person.

However, viral hepatitis can be prevented, and it is important that people are aware of this fact. Safe and effective vaccines are available for the prevention of hepatitis A and hepatitis B virus infection. More than 130 million infants in South-East Asia have received three doses of the hepatitis B vaccine, and the vaccine has been well accepted by the community and health workers. Good infection control measures by health workers, and screening blood for transfusion, can protect against hepatitis B and C, as can use of condoms during sexual intercourse. The best protection against hepatitis A and E is consumption of only safe food and water.

Implementation of these preventive measures also presents some challenges. Since the birth dose of the hepatitis B vaccine needs to be administered within 24 hours, health personnel who attend to the mother and newborn should be trained to give this vaccine. Rural areas have logistical challenges for storing vaccines due to lack of cold-chain infrastructure.

The biggest challenge is the lack of awareness about hepatitis – among the public, the policy-makers as well as health workers. World Hepatitis Day is only the beginning – with greater multi sectoral commitment, continuous endeavours towards mass awareness and concerted effort in the prevention and control of viral hepatitis, the burden of this disease can be significantly reduced.

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