Message from Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh,
Regional Director for South-East Asia Region, on the occasion of
World Hepatitis Day, 28 July 2017

The WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia is observing the 7th World Hepatitis Day on 28th July 2017 to highlight the collective efforts being made by WHO and the World Hepatitis Alliance towards the elimination of hepatitis as a public health threat by 2030. This is the vision and goal envisaged in the WHO “Global Health Sector Strategy on Viral Hepatitis 2016–2021” and has also been included as a target in Sustainable Development Agenda 2030. The theme for this year’s World Hepatitis Day is “Eliminate hepatitis”.

Scientific advances and breakthroughs, coupled with global solidarity and commitment, have reversed the trend for most communicable diseases but not viral hepatitis, an infection that is preventable and yet continues to exact a large toll on human lives. The WHO South-East Asia Region has nearly 49 million people living with chronic hepatitis B and C and an estimated 408 000 succumb to the infection and its complications each year.

Hepatitis A and E – that are water- and foodborne infections – have largely been controlled due to improved water, sanitation and hygiene; however, in many countries of the Region, multiple outbreaks of these totally preventable diseases continue to be reported.

Universal vaccination of all newborns and infants has the highest impact on preventing new hepatitis B infections. Point-of-care and rapid diagnostic tests are now available for hepatitis B and C infections. There is effective treatment for hepatitis B and newer drugs for hepatitis C can cure the disease in 95% of cases that get access to treatment. There has been unprecedented progress in cost reduction and access to the newer, directly-acting antiviral drugs. Once unaffordable, these medicines are now available at much lower prices in most low- and middle-income countries.

With these available tools at hand, efforts towards addressing viral hepatitis in a holistic manner and with a public health approach need to be enhanced. The WHO SEA Region has developed, with the goal of ending viral hepatitis as a public health threat by 2030, a Regional Action Plan for Hepatitis that will provide an actionable framework for implementing evidence-based interventions at scale.

Five key messages that I want to give out on this important day are:

1. All infants and newborns must be immunized at birth for hepatitis B, and followed up with the regular 2–3 doses of the same vaccine as per national guidelines.
2. All injections need to be safe – countries should aim to adopt safety engineered syringes such as re-use prevention (RUP) and sharp injury prevention (SIP) syringes in therapeutic care, both in the public and private sector.

3. Every unit of blood and related products should be screened for hepatitis B & C.

4. Safe drinking water and effective sanitation needs to be made a reality in every community.

5. Every person should be offered the opportunity to know his/her hepatitis status, and appropriate treatment be provided to those infected.

Hepatitis is a preventable and treatable disease. We need strong political commitment and speedy and innovative implementation of the Regional Action Plan in an integrated manner. We are also committed to support Member States in developing their national action plans for prevention and control of hepatitis.

I thank all of you for your strong contribution to achieve our vision of eliminating hepatitis in the South-East Asia Region by 2030.

Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh
Regional Director