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News

Viral hepatitis appears on World Health Assembly agenda for first time

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The World Health Organization is being urged to step up the fight against viral hepatitis and develop a comprehensive approach to its prevention and treatment, with a resolution on the disease to be presented to the 63rd World Health Assembly later this month.

This will be the first time that the assembly has considered viral hepatitis, despite the huge burden of disease worldwide, said Steven Wiersma, medical officer and hepatitis focal point at WHO's headquarters in Geneva.

"One in 12 people in the world are chronically infected with hepatitis B [and] the burden is extraordinarily high, yet somehow it's been left off the world's public health agenda," he said.

WHO is already active in preventing viral hepatitis by promoting immunisation and educating on blood and injection safety, but no comprehensive plan and no programmes for people who are chronically infected exist. WHO says that some 350 million people worldwide are chronically infected with hepatitis B and 250 million with hepatitis C.

Dr Wiersma said, "Asia has a disproportionately high burden of hepatitis B, and hepatitis C has left a trail of destruction wherever unsafe healthcare, injection, and blood handling practices are common.

"The resolution is a starting point; and although sceptics will say it's just more words, there is now real momentum to take on hepatitis globally—from patients' advocacy groups, clinicians, public health officials, and politicians."

Dr Wiersma was speaking on the sidelines of a meeting in Hong Kong on viral hepatitis in Asia, hosted by the Asia and Pacific Alliance to Eliminate Viral Hepatitis. The meeting brought together clinicians, academics, and government officials from China, Mongolia, and the United Kingdom, as well as agencies such as the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and WHO, to discuss what lessons could be learnt from China's experience of viral hepatitis control and prevention.

Around 60% of China's population has been infected with hepatitis B, just under 10% of the population is chronically infected, and the disease causes an estimated 263 000 deaths a year from liver cirrhosis and cancer.

But China's free nationwide hepatitis B vaccination programme now covers 81% of newborns, and a national catch-up campaign covering the 150 million children aged 1 to 19 years who have not yet been vaccinated is well advanced. Consequently chronic hepatitis B infection among the under 5s has gone from 10% a decade ago to less than 1% now.

China's hepatitis B vaccination programme was praised by Andrew Hall, chairman of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation and professor of infectious disease epidemiology at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

"This generation of Chinese people will probably have lower rates of liver cancer than their contemporaries in the UK," he said.

Affordable treatment is the next step, together with education to rid hepatitis B of its stigma in China. In February this year the Chinese government banned pre-employment and pre-school enrolment screening for hepatitis B, in a bid to break down the discrimination that people with the disease face.

"China is still in need of resources for a nationwide education campaign and also routine vaccination for healthcare workers," said Samuel So, director of the Asian Liver Center at Stanford School of Medicine, California.

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