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A hepatitis warning

The impact of hepatitis in the Asia Pacific region is set to rise if the issue is not tackled on multiple levels.

LEADING experts in viral hepatitis, in conjunction with World Hepatitis Day on July 28, have urged governments and the public across Asia Pacific to become more aware of the devastating effects of hepatitis on individuals, their families and the community at large.

The group, known as CEVHAP (Coalition to Eradicate Viral Hepatitis in Asia Pacific) was recently formed to address the lack of awareness and political will to tackle issues associated with viral hepatitis.

Incorporated in October 2010, CEVHAP membership is comprised of many world-renowned hepatitis and virology experts, utilising the collective expertise of its members to assist the region through partnership with a broad range of stakeholders, including government bodies in public policy formulation and health education.

Viral hepatitis, particularly hepatitis B and C, affects one in 12 people worldwide, claiming the lives of approximately one million people every year.

Asia Pacific carries the major part of the global burden of viral hepatitis. China and India together have an estimated 123 million people chronically infected with hepatitis B and 59 million people chronically infected with hepatitis C, accounting for almost 50% of all infections worldwide.

On the local front, there are an estimated 2.5 million Malaysians who are infected with chronic hepatitis B or C, and some 25% of these individuals are at risk of serious liver damage.

"Viral hepatitis is a life-threatening disease, a situation made worse by the fact that a large proportion of those infected do not know that they carry the virus. Awareness of the disease

has become a critical issue," said Prof Dr Rosmawati Mohamed, consultant hepatologist at University Malaya Medical Centre and an executive council member of CEVHAP.

"Compounding the problem, viral hepatitis is mostly a silent disease and many people are also ignorant about how it is transmitted and how it can be fatal if diagnosed at a late stage," she added.

The number of people chronically infected with, and annually dying as, a result of viral hepatitis exceed the prevalence and death due to HIV/AIDS and any cancer. Despite having a similar social impact, hepatitis lacks the same level of awareness and political momentum.

This is the first year that July 28 is recognised as World Hepatitis Day globally, as a result of the World Health Assembly's Resolution on Viral Hepatitis (WHA63.R18) of May 21, 2010.

The resolution also expresses concern about the lack of progress in the prevention, control and treatment of viral hepatitis around the world.

"WHO is calling for a global approach to tackle the problem of viral hepatitis, and we see that it is our role, as experts in the field, to ensure Asia Pacific is part of, if not leading, some elements of the global approach," said Prof Stephen Locarnini, divisional head of the Victorian Infectious Diseases Reference Laboratory in Melbourne, Australia, and co-founder of CEVHAP.

CEVHAP's goal is to act as a bridge between the WHO Resolution and the Asia Pacific region. Its early focus is on Hepatitis B and C, the two types of hepatitis with the greatest impact in the region.

"While chronic hepatitis is a silent disease with little or no symptoms for many years, it is also a silent disease when it comes to public awareness and government attention.

"This has led to the situation we find ourselves in today, where a large population with viral hepatitis do not seek medical attention or receive treatment – and this is also true for countries where the treatment is reimbursed by the government," said Prof D. S. Chen, distinguished chair professor of the College of Medicine at National Taiwan University and co-founder of CEVHAP.

"The burden of hepatitis B on the health system will continue to rise unless effective public policy interventions are implemented by governments across the region," said Prof Locarnini.

"We are not saying that nothing has been done – there has been progress in countries particularly in the area of universal vaccination – it's just that a lot more can and needs to be done to effectively tackle this issue."

The Malaysian Campaign on World Hepatitis Day 2011, led by its organising chairperson, Prof Dr Rosmawati, has been scheduling a series of events over the period from June 15 to July 30 to observe World Hepatitis Day 2011 and draw public attention to the serious health threats posed by viral hepatitis.

In line with the campaign theme, "Know your liver, B aware, C a Dr", the organising committee aims to improve prevention, diagnosis and treatment for hepatitis B and C in the country.

Activities, such as public forums, hepatitis B and C testing, and counseling on treatment and vaccination for viral hepatitis have been conducted in 27 centres, including 18 hospitals nationwide to create better awareness of the disease among the public.

The campaign objective is to not only raise the profile of viral hepatitis, but also promote greater awareness of how it is transmitted, as many who are infected are unaware that they carry the virus.

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Prof Dr Rosmawati giving a talk at one of the public forums held during the Malaysian campaign.



Members of the public taking the opportunity to go for blood screening at the main event for the Malaysian campaign on World Hepatitis Day 2011 at Sunway Pyramid.