



INTERNATIONAL HARM REDUCTION ASSOCIATION

MEDIA ALERT

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Experts Call for Improved Responses to a Hidden Epidemic of Hepatitis C

World Hepatitis Awareness Day is met with high levels of undiagnosed infections, new study reveals

September 28, Sofia

Leaders from international agencies and communities at a special event in Bulgaria have called for strengthened national advocacy efforts and European Union-wide recommendations on hepatitis C virus (HCV) with the goal to ensure timely diagnosis, prevention, treatment and care of HCV for all in need.

"We are calling on the EU and national governments to urgently recognize hepatitis C as a major public health threat" added Nadine Piorkowsky, the President of the European Liver Patient Association.

A new study by Central and Eastern European Harm Reduction Network (CEEHRN) for the World Hepatitis Awareness Day (October 1 2007) highlights the significant inconsistencies in HCV testing and diagnosis across the European countries. Only between 10% and 40% of people with HCV know about their infection, according to data from different parts of Europe - including the Czech Republic, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and the UK.

"In the absence of sufficient awareness and testing in Europe, morbidity and mortality from HCV infections are rising and will continue to rise in the coming decades", said Jeffrey Lazarus of the World Health Organization.

Effective management of HCV in Europe is impossible without a greater commitment to address the needs of injecting drug users (IDUs). Across the European countries, between 20% and 90% of new HCV cases are identified among past or current IDUs. Nevertheless, evidence based measures to prevent HCV and to reduce drug-related harms remain insufficient, especially in Eastern Europe. To confound matters, IDUs are often systematically excluded from existing HCV treatment programs. "Our response to hepatitis will fail, if we fail to improve our work with and among drug users," said Simona Merkinaite from CEEHRN.

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(English, Russian, Lithuanian)

Background

In recent years, hepatitis C virus (HCV) has emerged as a major threat to public health worldwide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), an estimated 180 million people globally are infected with HCV, with 130 million of these being chronic HCV carriers. The virus often presents no symptoms, and as a consequence, a big proportion of the people infected around the world may still be unaware of their status.

Without diagnosis and treatment, HCV becomes a chronic illness in about 85% of those infected - resulting in chronic liver diseases, cirrhosis and liver cancer. Globally, an estimated 250,000 people die of HCV-related causes each year, and HCV is the most common reason for liver transplantations in some countries.

HCV is a non-discriminatory virus – affecting people of all ages, races and backgrounds around the world. Due to the nature of the virus, however, HCV spreads especially rapidly amongst injecting drug users (IDUs). In a recent assessment of 13 countries in Central and Eastern Europe (home to an estimated 2.1–3.3 million IDUs), the prevalence of HCV was found to be as high as 70%–90% among IDUs - which also reflects the virus transmission patterns in most Western European countries.

Despite being the group with the highest risks of HCV transmission, there is inadequate prevention, treatment and care for IDUs - especially across the new European Union member states, Russia and other Eastern European countries (as documented in the report “Hepatitis C Among Drug Users in the New EU Member States and Neighborhood” developed by the Central and Eastern European Harm Reduction Network in partnership with medical professionals and civil society representatives). In most of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe, IDUs do not have access to testing and counseling, HCV services are poorly linked to established services for IDUs, and there is a generally low level of HCV research about IDU communities and ongoing risk behaviors. IDUs are also systematically denied the HCV treatment, care and support that they need - despite the fact that international guidelines clearly state that active drug use can not be an exclusionary criterion.

The report “Hepatitis C Among Drug Users in the New EU Member States and Neighborhood” is available in English and Russian at www.ceehrn.org/hepatitis

The report “HCV Infection in Europe” is available in English from October 1, 2007 at www.ceehrn.org/hepatitis and www.hepatitiday.info.

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