

The Elimination of Hepatitis C in Portugal and Europe is possible by 2030

BRUSSELS, 12 October 2017 – Leading Portuguese government representatives, politicians, experts, medical specialists and hepatitis patient advocacy groups gathered in Brussels today to announce their intention to work jointly towards the elimination of the Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) in Portugal by 2030 by signing the ‘Hepatitis C Elimination Manifesto’.

The event follows the first European Policy Summit dedicated to the Elimination of the Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) in Europe that took place in February 2016 in Brussels and during which the ‘**Hepatitis C Elimination Manifesto**’ was presented outlining policy asks for the elimination of hepatitis C in Europe by 2030.

Carlos Zorrinho, Member of the European Parliament who hosted the event, commented, “I welcome the fact that the Summit on the elimination of Hepatitis C Virus in Portugal is the first to implement the European strategy to eradicate HCV by 2030. This is possible not only due to the growing awareness of the importance of the problem in Portugal but also because the health services and patient associations in Portugal have created a vibrant space for dialogue in order to find the best solutions.”

Fernando Araújo, Portuguese Secretary of State for Health said, "Portugal has made outstanding progress regarding the HCV approach during the last years. The Portuguese Government is deeply committed to ending the HCV epidemic by 2030 and we believe that we will be able to achieve that goal even before then.

In order to do so, the first Portuguese National Strategy for Viral Hepatitis was launched this year. It is based on universality (access to treatment of all persons with hepatitis C, eligible for treatment), on equity (harmonized treatment at national level) and quality (most appropriate treatment based on scientific evidence), but it is also focused on prevention, information, awareness, and targeted screening.

Furthermore, for the first time, special attention was given to the vulnerable groups: prisoners, sex workers, the homeless and emigrants, who have difficult access to care.

From now on, this reality will change: together we can achieve 2030 goals!"

Ricardo Baptista-Leite, Member of the Portuguese National Parliament, said “Following Portugal’s inspirational leadership in terms of sustainable access to universal treatment, there is now a need to embrace hepatitis C elimination as a public health goal which demands determined leadership, a stronger role at the primary care level and further investments in prevention, testing and diagnosis and linkage-to-care. There is a particular need to develop specific programs, along with civil society NGOs, for key populations including prisoners, injecting substance users and migrants.”

Luís Mendão, Director EATG-European AIDS Treatment Group Coalition Plus, commented, "Portugal has made giant steps in its response to hepatitis C since February 2015. The remaining challenges to ensure elimination by 2030 regard knowledge, evidence and rights based prevention, testing and speedy universal access to affordable treatment

(not leaving PWID and people in prisons behind) - all of this is doable with political evidence informed leadership. The Portuguese authorities in that case can count on the support of civil society, key communities and patients and all these stakeholders must be ready to work together to achieve this common goal".

"After twenty-five years of research, scientists have delivered the means to effectively cure hepatitis C, making the elimination of hepatitis C in Europe within the next decade a genuine possibility. But political action at national level, especially in a country such as Portugal where hepatitis C infection is a major public health challenge, is needed to make this happen", stated **Prof Angelos Hatzakis**, Co-Chair of the Hepatitis B and C Public Policy Association. "Our 'Elimination Manifesto' serves as a rallying platform for European and national policymakers and advocates. If we act now, Europe will be hepatitis C free by 2030", continued Prof Hatzakis.

About Hepatitis C in Europe & Portugal

- HCV is a major global public health issue with significant morbidity and mortality rates. Up to 180 million individuals are infected worldwide. Between 350,000-500,000 people die annually of HCV-related causes.
- In Europe, 15 million Europeans are infected and more people die each year from HCV than from HIV.
- Despite Europe's effective epidemic tracking, HCV continues to spread undetected as a "silent pandemic" in Europe, as patients often have no symptoms during the first 20-30 years. In addition to the suffering of patients, the economic burden of the disease is significant due to healthcare costs and indirect loss of productivity.
- In Portugal, as of July 2017, over 17,591 patients have been diagnosed with chronic HCV and included in the Portuguese national HCV registry. All their treatments have been authorized and, of those, 11,792 patients have already initiated treatment. Finally, 6,639 patients have already been proven clinically cured with a 96,5% SVR.¹
- As presented at the EASL International Liver Conference, the treatment program, as of February 2017, ensured that 3,477 premature liver related deaths, 339 liver transplants, 1,951 liver cancers and 5,417 cases of cirrhosis have been averted, 62,869 life years have been gained, and 271.4 million Euros on treatment costs related to hepatitis c complications have been saved. Hence, treating HCV infected individuals today will not only avert needless pain and suffering, but it will actually prove to be cost effective and cost saving for the Portuguese National Health System in the future.

About Elimination

- Elimination of a disease is intended as the reduction to zero of the incidence of a specified disease in a defined geographical area as a result of deliberate efforts.
- HCV elimination was made possible by recent therapeutic advances, which have made HCV curable in the majority of instances - cure rates have progressed from 6% in 1991 (first interferon approved treatment for HCV) to over 90% in 2014 (directly acting antivirals introduced).
- Holistic approaches and strategies to improve overall awareness, increase testing for those at risk and link infected individuals to specific care pathways need to be developed.

About the “Hepatitis C Elimination Manifesto”

Signatories

Signatories of the ‘Hepatitis C Elimination Manifesto’ pledge to:

- Make hepatitis C and its elimination in Europe an explicit public health priority to be pursued at all levels
- Ensure that patients, civil society groups and other relevant stakeholders are directly involved in developing and implementing hepatitis C elimination strategies
- Pay particular attention to the links between hepatitis C and social marginalisation
- Introduce a European Hepatitis Awareness Week

The Elimination Manifesto is supported by the following organisations:

- European Liver Patients Association (ELPA)
- European Association for the Study of the Liver (EASL)
- Viral Hepatitis Prevention Board (VHPB)
- The Correlation Network
- The International Center for Migration Health and Development (ICMHD)
- The World Hepatitis Alliance (WHA)
- Hepatitis B and C Public Policy Association

The main authors of the “Hepatitis C Elimination Manifesto” are:

- Prof Jeffrey V. Lazarus, University of Copenhagen (Denmark)
- Prof Mark Thursz, Imperial College, London (UK)
- Prof Pierre Van Damme, Viral Hepatitis Prevention Board, Vaccine and Infectious Disease Institute, Antwerp (Belgium)
- Prof Angelos Hatzakis, Athens University Medical School (Greece)

-ENDS-

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About Hepatitis B & C Public Policy Association

The Hepatitis B & C Public Policy Association was founded in 2009 by a group of leading European scientists, public health experts and patient advocates. We aim to urge and facilitate the formulation of public policies at national and international level for the communication, prevention and management of viral Hepatitis B and C. The Association’s unique approach in furtherance of this aim is to gather together, and work in partnership with, the major stakeholders in the field of these diseases including regulators, patients, clinicians, public health and civil society communities and the private sector. The first ever HCV Policy Summit dedicated to the elimination of hepatitis C in Europe was organized by this association and its partners. in February 2016 in Brussels. The Summit was addressed by EU Health Commissioner Andriukaitis, MEPs and national policy-makers.

For more information about the Association’s activities please visit www.hepbccppa.org