

There is now a momentum for hepatitis elimination

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The World Health Organization and its Goodwill Ambassador for Hepatitis in South-East Asia Region, Mr Amitabh Bachchan, have welcomed India's national action plan for viral hepatitis which aims to reach life-saving drugs and diagnostics to over 50 million affected people across the country. "The process of detection of hepatitis is important. If detected timely, hepatitis can be cured and I am an example of that," said Mr Bachchan, a hepatitis B survivor who has been passionately advocating for countries to prevent, test and treat hepatitis. He was speaking at the release of India's National Action Plan for Viral Hepatitis. The hepatitis programme in India is expected to benefit an estimated 50 million people suffering from hepatitis - 40 million from hepatitis B, which is preventable, and over 10 million from hepatitis C, which can be cured. Complimenting India for becoming the first country in WHO South-East Asia Region to release a national action plan for hepatitis, Regional Director Dr Poonam Khetrpal Singh said, "India's efforts are commendable and reflect the country's commitment to health and universal health coverage." The Regional Director and WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Hepatitis were speaking at an event yesterday where India's Minister of State for Health and Family Welfare Mr Ashwini Kumar Choubey released the National Action Plan for Viral Hepatitis and the National Guidelines for Hepatitis B. The action plan, which is in sync with the WHO's regional and global action plans, follows launch of the National Viral Hepatitis Control Programme on the World Hepatitis Day last year. The programme aims at comprehensively addressing - prevention, treatment and management of hepatitis A to E. "Free drugs and diagnostics will help timely detection, treatment and prevention of disease complications. People would get themselves treated without any financial hardship," the Regional Director said, adding that, "I look forward to phased implementation of these guidelines and their introduction at all levels of the health system and assure WHO's partnership and support to India in eliminating hepatitis." An estimated 257 million people are living with chronic hepatitis B and 71 million with hepatitis C globally. Only 5% of those with hepatitis B and 3% of those with hepatitis C have access to treatment. Twenty one countries account for 75% of global hepatitis burden, almost 15% of which is in countries of WHO South-East Asia Region, mainly in India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Thailand. Nearly 40,000 people die in WHO South-East Asia Region every year. Lauding the contribution of WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Hepatitis, Dr Khetrpal Singh said there is now a momentum for hepatitis elimination in the Region. For the past two years Mr Bachchan's passion, voice and generosity of spirit has significantly increased awareness of hepatitis, influencing policymakers and the public alike. His many initiatives as Goodwill Ambassador have effectively resonated that we can and we must eliminate hepatitis as a public health problem. "If my voice can make a difference, I am willing to join the campaign for hepatitis whenever needed," the Goodwill Ambassador said, adding that spreading awareness about hepatitis and ending discrimination, particularly against women affected by hepatitis B, is his priority. WHO has been advocating for hepatitis B vaccine at birth and subsequent doses in routine immunization programme for children, safe blood and blood products, safe syringes and vaccination of health workers, among key preventive measures. India has rolled out a number of cross sector initiatives for safe drinking water, sanitary toilets, and Swachh Bharat (clean India), which are also expected to contribute to prevention of viral hepatitis. What is hepatitis? Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver. The condition can be self-limiting or can progress to fibrosis (scarring), cirrhosis or liver cancer. Hepatitis viruses are the most common cause of hepatitis in the world. There are 5 main hepatitis viruses, referred to as types A, B, C, D and E. These 5 types are of greatest concern because of the burden of illness and death they cause and the potential for outbreaks and

epidemic spread. In particular, types B and C lead to chronic disease in hundreds of millions of people and, together, are the most common cause of liver cirrhosis and cancer. Hepatitis B and C usually occur as a result of parenteral contact with infected body fluids. Common modes of transmission for these viruses include receipt of contaminated blood or blood products, invasive medical procedures using contaminated equipment and for hepatitis B transmission from mother to baby at birth, from family member to child, and also by sexual contact. Acute infection may occur with limited or no symptoms.

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