

Timely testing saves lives: Statement by Commissioner Andriukaitis on the World Hepatitis Day

July 28th 2019 marks World Hepatitis Day.

Each year on this day, we have an opportunity to reflect how far we have come on the path to eliminating hepatitis globally, but also, to think how much more needs to be done to achieve this goal by 2030. 'Invest in eliminating hepatitis', this year's theme could not be more timely in encouraging us all to set a clear direction for investment to ensure long-term, patient-focused results can be reached.

It saddens me to see the large number of people still living in the EU/EEA with Hepatitis B – which is preventable, and Hepatitis C – which is both preventable and curable. The figures are overwhelming – an estimated 4.7 million people are chronically infected with hepatitis B, 3.9 million with hepatitis C, and we lose more lives to Hepatitis B and C than HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis combined. How in 2019 can this be? How can it be that unimaginable suffering and stigma is endured by so many in Europe, and precious lives lost?

As it stands, Viral hepatitis B and C affect 325 million people worldwide causing 1.4 million deaths a year, and yet, over 80% of people living with hepatitis are lacking prevention, testing and treatment services. This situation can and has to change. Like other communicable diseases, vaccination, testing, early diagnosis and linkage to care for hepatitis can interrupt transmission and save lives.

So my one simple message today is: we need to focus our efforts on prevention. We have fantastic life-saving preventative tools at our disposal, so let's utilise them. Take vaccination, the great public health ally of our time, that can prevent both hepatitis A and B! A true investment in elimination means making sure these preventative tools are not only available, but accessible to European citizens, and where diagnosis does sadly fall, that they be properly supported with targeted, quality care.

So what next? It is encouraging to see most EU countries have universal vaccination programmes in place for hepatitis B, but I call on Member States, once again, to concentrate their efforts and further increase coverage against vaccine-preventable diseases. This can be achieved in many ways, not least through strengthened cooperation and implementation of actions as laid down in the [Council Recommendation on vaccination](#).

Another positive to bring forward and act upon is that all EU Member States have subscribed to the Sustainable Development Goals which aim to eliminate hepatitis as a public health threat by 2030. The European Commission is committed to helping Member States respond to this call, and has already put

a number of actions in place to aid acceleration. Under the 3rd Health Programme, over 8 million euros have been invested in outreach actions for vulnerable groups and improving access to integrated testing and care. The EU has pledged more than 50 million euros to fund hepatitis research with a view to improving testing, treatment outcomes and enhancing the understanding of disease progression. Finally, the EU Drug Strategy 2013-2020 addresses the challenge of continued high incidence of blood-borne diseases, including the hepatitis C virus, among injecting drug users.

No one life should endure suffering or be lost to hepatitis and no one nation can solve this issue alone. We must therefore band together and strive jointly to secure a 2030 where hepatitis is eliminated – because every death is one too many.