

Global Elimination of Viral Hepatitis: Challenges and Encouraging Factors

Dear Editor,

Viral hepatitis is a global public health concern as in excess of 320 million people are suffering from the disease and is responsible for the deaths of more than 1.3 million people each year.^[1,2] It is worth noting that the number of deaths occurring due to the disease is higher (and still showing an upward trend) than those attributed to human immunodeficiency virus.^[1] Further, it was observed that in the year 2015, in excess of 250 million and 70 million people were living with chronic forms of hepatitis B and hepatitis C infection, respectively.^[3] Moreover, in the same year, more than 0.7 million and 0.4 million deaths have been associated with cirrhosis and liver cancer across the world.^[1]

Acknowledging the magnitude of the disease, its global distribution, and propensity to result in life-threatening chronic complications, the member states of the World Health Organization have set the target to eliminate the disease (viz., minimize the incidence and attributed deaths by 90% and 65%, respectively) by 2030.^[1] These targets have been set in accordance with the attainment of universal health coverage and accomplishment of the Sustainable Development Goals.^[1]

The accomplishment of these targets will require a comprehensive approach, comprising of interventions such as strengthening of surveillance activities to enable modifications in existing policies, capacity building in diagnostic and therapeutic services, expansion of services to ensure it is available universally, consistent financial support to fund program activities, and adoption of innovative measures to strengthen the response.^[2-4] In addition, measures should be taken to create awareness, foster linkage, mobilize resources, develop evidence-based policy, and strengthen preventive measures, screening, care, and treatment-related activities.^[2,3]

It is important to note that due to hepatitis B vaccine, the incidence of infection has significantly reduced, but other prevention activities for hepatitis B or C like safe administration of intravenous drugs has not been implemented adequately.^[1] This has been the main reason for the rise in the incidence of hepatitis C cases to 2.86 million in the past 2 years.^[1,3] Moreover, as large numbers of adult presents with the chronic forms of the disease, there is a great need to enhance access to diagnostic and treatment services.^[1,2] In fact, the available estimates for the year 2015 suggest that only 9% and 20% of the hepatitis B and C infected patients were diagnosed, while out of these detected patients only 8% and 7.4% of patients were put on treatment for hepatitis B and C, respectively.^[1,3] It is quite encouraging that nations which have strengthened the testing and treatment services through sustained political commitment have definitely excelled and are moving in the right direction to eliminate the disease.^[1,3]

To conclude, it is quite evident that viral hepatitis is associated with significant impact on the quality of life of the affected patients. However, ample opportunities exist for the elimination of the disease, and thus, there is a significant need to strengthen the prevention, detection, and treatment aspects of the disease.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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