



Beirut, August 21, 2014 – The Ministry of Public Health and the national hepatitis programme launched in collaboration with the Lebanese Order of Physicians, the Lebanese Society of Gastroenterology, the Lebanese Society for Infectious Diseases and Clinical Microbiology (LSIDCM), Roche Lebanon and WHO Lebanon the 2014 national hepatitis awareness campaign with the aim to increase awareness and understanding of viral hepatitis in order to reduce the spread of the disease.

The campaign was launched at a press conference under the auspices of the Minister of Public Health H.E.M. Wael Abu Faour and was attended by officials from the medical and civil societies along with many social and media figures.

Increased understanding and education among the local community is an essential first step in reducing the significant number of people being newly infected with hepatitis B and C every year as well as delivering the ultimate goal of eradicating these diseases.

Lebanon has put in place good hepatitis prevention and control measures. Hepatitis B vaccination is routinely given to all newborns and it is part of the childhood vaccinations. Health workers are all vaccinated for hepatitis B, too. Recently, in response to increased hepatitis A infections, an awareness campaign was launched to educate people on hygiene. And efforts to ensure safe water supplies are accelerated in particular in those areas most affected by water shortages and hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees. Moreover, treatment for hepatitis B and C is available and the government subsidizes treatment for poor people, based on nationally adapted guidebook developed with WHO support in 2012. It is also to note that the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health has been very vigilant, along with all the blood banks in the

country, in ensuring safe blood transfusion for more than two decades by now.

However, due to the crisis in Syria, a population of much more than one million additional people is in need of hepatitis prevention and control measures including vaccination, hygiene, infection control, safe blood transfusions, early diagnosis and treatment. This requires utmost commitment and support from all actors and partners involved.

In line with the national hepatitis strategy, as of today, the Ministry of Health announces that hepatitis B vaccination will be made available to non-governmental organizations providing services for populations at high risk of hepatitis transmission, such as people who inject drugs and men who have sex with men. WHO guidelines for hepatitis do strongly recommend this intervention, since it will fill gaps in vaccination coverage among people who are at very high risk and thus definitely reduce disease burden.

On this occasion WHO acting representative Dr Gabriele Riedner proposed that government, nongovernmental organizations, physicians and the pharmaceutical industry work together to make the new very effective treatments for chronic hepatitis C available and affordable to patients in Lebanon, as the price for these medicines has been prohibitively high. Few lower income countries are now able to procure at least one of the medicines at significantly lower cost. In Lebanon, achieving affordable treatment will require a very good strategy and champion negotiators.

WHO reiterated its support to Lebanon's hepatitis prevention and control efforts.

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Friday 3rd of May 2024 04:25:21 PM