

Message from Dr Palitha Mahipala, WHO Representative

27 July 2021 – WHO is urging countries to eliminate viral hepatitis as a public health problem by 2030.

This year, we are commemorating World Hepatitis Day amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. World Hepatitis Day represents an occasion to reflect on our commitment towards the continuity of hepatitis services and the elimination targets, called by the Global Health Sector Strategy and embedded in our regional vision "Health for All by All".

The theme of World Hepatitis Day this year is "Hepatitis can't wait", which conveys the urgency of efforts needed to eliminate hepatitis as a public health threat by 2030. With a person dying every 30 seconds from a hepatitis-related illness – even in the current COVID-19 crisis – we can't wait to act on viral hepatitis.

Pakistan is facing numerous challenges in its hepatitis response. It has the highest prevalence of hepatitis C (5%) globally and the highest number of people suffering from hepatitis C virus after China.

COVID-19 has further challenged the response and the country's essential health services, including vaccination, diagnosis and care. Despite the challenges, we must not lose sight of our goals of achieving universal health coverage as part of our regional vision of "Health for All by All".

Successful elimination requires scaling up 5 key recommended interventions. We need to vaccinate infants against hepatitis B, prevent mother-to-child transmission of hepatitis B virus, ensure blood and injection safety, reduce harm among people who inject drugs and implement testing with a view to treatment.

With establishment of a national programme at the Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination, our country has led the way over the last few years in hepatitis C testing and treatment, thanks to the strong political commitment of the Government and support of provincial departments of health.

But still, people in Pakistan are still becoming infected with viral hepatitis viruses in health care setting, precisely where they would expect to be safe. Unsafe injection practices continue to be a driving source of hepatitis B and C virus infections and other bloodborne diseases, such as HIV. At the same time, the coverage of hepatitis B birth dose vaccination — a key intervention to prevent mother-to-child transmission of hepatitis B virus is still very low and far from achieving the target. Such coverage hinders our efforts to achieve a hepatitis-free future for future generations.

I reiterate WHO's commitment to eliminating viral hepatitis and encourage a concerted effort among the relevant programmes, civil society and their partners to renew our commitments and efforts to eliminate viral hepatitis by 2030.

## Related link

## World Hepatitis Day 2021

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