

# Press Release

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## Experts look to HIV as they develop roadmap to eradicate viral hepatitis in Asia Pacific

Meeting of viral hepatitis experts looks at what can be learnt from global response to HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases to shape policy change across Asia Pacific and improve the lives of millions of people

**Taipei, Taiwan (Sunday 19 February 2012)** – Leaders from the global and Asia Pacific viral hepatitis community as well as World Health Organization (WHO) regional experts are meeting today at an agenda-setting event organized by The Coalition to Eradicate Viral Hepatitis in Asia Pacific (CEVHAP) to discuss what can be done to tackle viral hepatitis, especially B and C – two devastating diseases that affect approximately 340 million people across the region<sup>1,2</sup>.

The meeting, taking place at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Conference of the Asia Pacific Association for the Study of the Liver (APASL) is the first of its kind in the region to look at what can be learnt, in particular from the experiences of the HIV community in lobbying governments to improve public health policies.

CEVHAP is hosting the meeting in recognition of the fact that while driving policy change is a challenging task, the experience of HIV/AIDS has shown that it can be done and over the last 30 years the efforts of HIV/AIDS advocacy has helped to set the pace and shape the global response to the disease.

Speaking ahead of the event, HIV expert, Professor David Thomas, Chief of Infectious Diseases at the John Hopkins School of Medicine, USA said “Despite knowing about the different forms of viral hepatitis for many decades, and of their impact, the political response to hepatitis B and C lags far behind that of HIV. Surveillance and diagnosis of viral

hepatitis remain woefully under-resourced and many countries seem yet to realize that treatment, not only saves lives, but the broader public health benefits of treatment often outweigh the cost.”

A recently published survey of governments from across both the Western Pacific and South East Asia has shown that while the majority of governments consider viral hepatitis an urgent public health issue, the extent and effectiveness of existing policies varies greatly across the region and much remains to be done if political will is to be translated into action<sup>3</sup>.

This meeting is also being organized to coincide with the first annual meeting of APASL since the WHO issued its Global Hepatitis Strategy in response to the agreement of a World Health Assembly resolution on viral hepatitis (WHA63 R18), which for the first time recognized the full scale of the challenge and finally puts viral hepatitis on the global healthcare agenda, alongside HIV/AIDS, TB and Malaria. The strategy provides a framework for national governments to respond to the challenge of viral hepatitis within their own borders but also as part of a cohesive approach to tackle the disease across regions.

Prof Ding-Shinn Chen, Immediate Past Dean of the National Taiwan University College of Medicine and Chair of CEVHAP commented “Asia Pacific has already shown what can be achieved through coordinated action, with many governments already achieving the Western Pacific regional target of reducing chronic hepatitis B infection rates to less than 2% among children over 5 years old by 2012. Taiwan is a good illustration of that, but further collaboration is essential if we are to begin to tackle viral hepatitis across our region.”

In Asia Pacific, CEVHAP is uniquely placed to support and inform the regional governmental response to viral hepatitis, with an extensive network of experts and a framework of activity underway to mobilize advocacy, build an improved evidence base and provide best practice sharing of national policies across the region.

Commenting on the importance of the CEVHAP event, Charles Gore, President of the World Hepatitis Alliance said “The HIV/AIDS advocacy community blazed a trail for all those living

with the disease. They have pushed and pushed and they haven't shut up. Their efforts over 30 years offer us in the viral hepatitis community so many important lessons and it would be criminally stupid to ignore them. Their work is a gift to us and we will accept and use it. The inexplicable neglect of viral hepatitis is going to stop."

### **About CEVHAP**

The Coalition to Eradicate Viral Hepatitis in Asia Pacific (CEVHAP) is the first organization of its kind in the region, established as an independent, multidisciplinary body to advocate for public policy reforms that reduce the burden of and ultimately eliminate viral hepatitis in Asia Pacific.

Incorporated in October 2010, CEVHAP membership is comprised of many world-renowned hepatitis and virology experts, utilizing the collective expertise of its members to assist the region through partnership with a broad range of stakeholders, including government bodies in public policy formation and health education. For more information please visit [www.cevhap.org](http://www.cevhap.org)

### **Viral Hepatitis Public Policy in Asia Pacific**

The viral hepatitis policy landscape is hugely variable across Asia Pacific with few consistencies between countries and an urgent unmet need for cohesive regional policies to tackle these diseases. A policy audit conducted by the WHO and World Hepatitis Alliance recently revealed<sup>3</sup>:

- 90% of Western Pacific countries consider hepatitis B and / or hepatitis C an urgent public health issue
- 16 of 21 countries that responded within the Western Pacific report having a national strategy in place, but with only 11 reporting that a designated individual has been appointed to lead the strategy
- Of 8 responding countries within South East Asia 63% responded saying that viral hepatitis was an urgent public health issue

- 6 of 8 countries that responded report having a national strategy in place and just 50% report having an individual in place to lead the strategy

For further information see the CEVHAP Fact Sheet on Viral Hepatitis Policy Across Asia Pacific.

### **Global Response to Viral Hepatitis**

In May 2010 the World Health Assembly ratified a resolution on viral hepatitis (WHA63 R18), the first time such a resolution had been agreed by the world's foremost health authority. Since then the WHO has developed a comprehensive implementation strategy which pulls together a wide range of products within the organization's armamentarium to assist countries in the development of national responses to viral hepatitis. Within Asia Pacific the Western Pacific and South East Asia WHO Regional Offices will be working with national governments to translate the global strategy at both regional and national levels.

### **References:**

1) Patel et al., 2006; 2) Kowdley et al. 3) 1 Viral Hepatitis: Global Policy. World Hepatitis Alliance.

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