Prevalence in Singapore may be low but the disease may affect more than expected due to lack of awareness

Viral hepatitis is a global public health challenge. A recent study from the World Health Organization (WHO) showed that hepatitis contributes to the highest number of deaths globally compared to major infectious diseases such as AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. Over 325 million people suffer from hepatitis B and C globally, with the disease contributing to over 1.34 million deaths a year.
Hepatitis is the most common cause of liver cirrhosis and liver cancer, with one in four hepatitis sufferers developing the symptoms. It is called the “Silent Killer” as patients often exhibit no obvious symptoms or signs of being infected, often unaware until the infection becomes chronic leading to serious complications.

The WHO’s Global Health Sector Strategy on Viral Hepatitis 2016-2021 aims to eliminate viral hepatitis by 2030 by a 90 per cent reduction of new cases of infection, with a 65 per cent reduction in mortality. For 2018, the WHO’s theme is “Test. Treat. Hepatitis”, emphasizing the urgent need for both the public and healthcare professionals to understand the methods of testing and treatment of viral hepatitis to stem the spread of new infections.

Dr. Rajneesh Kumar, executive council member, chairman of the TAP program at the National Foundation of Digestive Diseases (NFDD) in Singapore and a consultant specializing in liver diseases, has been working towards combating the spread of hepatitis infection through awareness and education.

**WHAT IS THE HEPATITIS SITUATION IN SINGAPORE?**

In Singapore, the prevalence of hepatitis B is 3.6 per cent for people aged 18-79, and estimated to be 0.2 per cent for hepatitis C. The number might not immediately seem significant but the burden is potentially higher since up to 50 per cent of hepatitis C carriers are unaware they have the disease. This can be attributed to a general lack of awareness of hepatitis, its diagnosis, symptoms, and treatment methods. Certain groups are also at higher risk of infection than others.
For example, a Singapore population study of halfway house residents with history of drug abuse revealed that one-third of them have hepatitis C.

**WHAT ARE THE UNMET NEEDS FOR SINGAPOREANS?**

Most of the problem stems from lack of awareness. Patients do not do anything because they are not aware they have a disease. One of the things we emphasize is getting a blood test. Another thing to know about hepatitis C is that it can be completely cured, with treatment efficacy rates of 99 per cent.

Most patients diagnosed or known to have hepatitis C default and do not follow through with their doctors, presuming that there is no treatment. It is good to know now that treatments are simple, fast, and effective. Hepatitis C can be treated by direct-acting antiviral (DAA) drugs, while hepatitis B can be prevented with a vaccine.

**HOW DOES THE NFDD SUPPORT THE GOVERNMENT IN REACHING THE WHO’S HEPATITIS ELIMINATION GOAL?**

The NFDD spreads awareness in a few ways. During World Hepatitis Day, we organize a public symposium and try to address the concerns of the public and patients who have hepatitis B or C. We educate and inform them about the disease, and the importance of keeping the liver healthy. We also have a website for educating the public about viral hepatitis and how it can cause liver diseases, at www.nfdd.sg. We target our outreach efforts at general practitioners, who may then be able to diagnose and treat patients at clinics effectively.

**THE NFDD TREATMENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (TAP)**

The NFDD works with companies that produce drugs targeting hepatitis C, and helps secure medicines for patients at lower prices compared to pharmacies. Patients who face difficulties affording these medicines can approach the NFDD via TAP to benefit from the cost reduction.

In 2017, about 147 patients benefitted under the TAP program. This year, more than 93 have benefitted so far in the first half of this year.

**ARE YOU AT RISK CHECKLIST**

By simply completing this checklist, you may get better insight into whether you may have unknowingly been exposed to either hepatitis B or C. If you are unsure of your answer, it is best to be cautious and answer ‘yes’.

This checklist is not meant to diagnose and cannot replace testing done by a medical practitioner. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your health and potential risk, please consult your physician to test for hepatitis today.

- I have had a blood transfusion and/or received blood products before 1992
- I am the recipient of a donor organ
- I live or have lived with a person suffering from hepatitis B or C
- My current or previous sexual partner has or had hepatitis B or C
- I have a tattoo or piercing that might have been performed under non-sterile conditions
I use/have used intravenous / intranasal drugs
My mother has or had hepatitis B or C
I’ve been experiencing fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea and abdominal pain
I look jaundiced

If you answered most of the questions with a yes, there is a chance that you may have been exposed to either hepatitis B or C. Learn more about hepatitis B and C by visiting www.nfdd.sg or speaking with your physician. Both viruses can be cured or managed with the right medication if diagnosed early.

**CONQUERING HEPATITIS C VIA MICRO-ELIMINATION (CHIME)**

Gilead Sciences is committed to helping the World Health Organization meet its goal of ending viral hepatitis by 2030. As we look to expand our impact, Gilead’s Medical Affairs team has developed CHIME, a program that will fund up to 30 hepatitis C (HCV) research grants focused on localizing international and national HCV elimination goals to meet the unique needs of smaller communities throughout the world. CHIME projects will be awarded up to US$350,000. Successful proposals should demonstrate clear scientific objectives, defined timelines, a comprehensive operational plan and potential to generate data which has relevance to the medical community and policymakers. Gilead is currently accepting proposal submissions from interested parties, reviewed on a rolling basis. Proposals will be accepted through 30 Sept 2018. For more information, visit www.gilead.com/research/conquering-hepatitis-via-micro-elimination.

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