

ACHIEVE

ASSOCIATIONS COLLABORATING ON HEPATITIS TO
IMMUNIZE AND ELIMINATE THE VIRUSES IN EUROPE

ACHIEVE Coalition perspective on EU4Health 2024 priorities to help drive forward viral hepatitis elimination across the European Union

The recent ECDC Hepatitis B and C network meeting on 14-15 March 2023 in Stockholm, confirmed that significant discrepancies exist throughout the EU/EEA with regards to the WHO's goal of viral hepatitis B and C elimination as a public health threat by 2030.

As a whole, the EU will therefore not reach this goal unless it collectively supports Member States that are struggling to remedy health inequalities.

Failing to hepatitis elimination means letting people suffer despite the availability of an effective vaccine against viral hepatitis B, the availability of a cure for hepatitis C, and effective therapy against hepatitis B. Many of these people might not even be aware of viral hepatitis and its dangers, including its link to cancer and other chronic liver diseases. A large proportion of those infected with hepatitis B and C in the EU are part of vulnerable populations, while others may live remotely with limited access to healthcare.

What is therefore needed are effective strategies to prevent transmission, cost-effective approaches to identify those who remain undiagnosed and improved linkage to care for those diagnosed. Undiagnosed infections can be found both in clearly defined risk groups (e.g., people who are using drugs, prisoners), as well as in the general population, who may be unaware that they have ever been exposed to a transmission risk.

On the positive side, the ECDC network meeting also revealed that there are good practices available (e.g., in Sweden, Spain, or Ireland) that can be shared across the region. For example, Ireland has developed a tool to understand their local viral hepatitis epidemic in a tailored manner, including identifying where their undiagnosed cases are and how best to identify them. This enables policymakers to make evidence-based decisions on which screening strategies are cost-effective, how cost-saving these measures are, and how effective they are in preventing cancer and other chronic liver diseases, as well as in terms of treatment costs, including transplantation.

With the new EU Public Health Expert Group, whose remit includes viral hepatitis, the European Commission has created a platform that could drive forward the roll-out of different measures to help countries achieve the elimination of hepatitis. ACHIEVE therefore requests that part of EU4Health funding in 2024 be used to enable the roll-out of this tool.

Secondly, the discussions of the hepatitis B and C network meeting identified migrants as an underserved risk group with regard to viral hepatitis. We request that EU4Health funding in 2024 provides an overview of the different healthcare needs of migrants into the EU, with a focus on prevalent communicable diseases including hepatitis B and C. Hepatitis B and C are highly prevalent in many countries outside the EU, and it is important to ensure equitable access to information, testing, and linkage to care for this population to ensure their needs are addressed in a manner that is ethical, respectful, and effective in eliminating viral hepatitis B and C.

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The European Commission has made an important first step in providing funding and human resources to improve access to healthcare for refugees from Ukraine. Building on this, the EU4Health funding in 2024 should be used to better characterise the needs of migrants with viral hepatitis B and/or C, and how to address them, bearing in mind that this is not a homogenous group and a careful assessment and a nuanced approach is essential for success.

Finally, the European Commission has decided to update the European Code Against Cancer (ECAC) which educate on how to reduces on how to reduce the risk of developing cancer. The European Commission has rightly pointed out the importance to educate the public on the link between hepatitis and cancer and update the Code accordingly. The current Code only encourages participation in childhood vaccination programmes for hepatitis B. It is thus important to ensure that the new ECAC inform the public more holistically on the link between hepatitis and cancer, transmission risks, and how to prevent them, including vaccination against hepatitis B, as well as testing and treatment opportunities for viral hepatitis B and C, all of which will contribute to reducing the risk of developing cancer. The EU4Health funding should be used to update the Code accordingly and disseminate it widely across the EU.

On behalf of the ACHIEVE Coalition,



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The ACHIEVE Coalition to eliminate viral hepatitis B and C is supported by AbbVie, Abbott, Cepheid and Gilead.