

MEP FRIENDS OF THE LIVER GROUP CALL TO ACTION 'THE EU MUST LEAD ON VIRAL HEPATITIS ELIMINATION BY 2030'

Webinar Report

On 25 April 2023, the European Association for the Study of the Liver (EASL) with the support of the ACHIEVE (Associations Collaborating on Hepatitis to Immunise and Eliminate the Viruses in Europe) Coalition, organised a webinar titled "[MEP Friends of the Liver Group Call to Action](#): The EU must lead on viral hepatitis elimination by 2030". The event was hosted on the European Commission's Health Policy Platform, discussing the Call to Action adopted by the members of the Friends of the Liver Group following an event in the European Parliament in October 2022.

The discussion shed light on the urgent need to eliminate viral hepatitis in the EU by 2030, in line with the World Health Organization's (WHO) Global Health Sector Strategy on Viral Hepatitis. During the webinar, five distinguished speakers shared their insights on the topic. These included **Ms. Marianne Takki**, Deputy Head of Unit, Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, DG SANTE, European Commission; **Prof. Maria Buti**, EASL Public Health Councillor; **Dr. Marieke Van Der Werf**, Head of Section for Sexually Transmitted Infections, Blood-Borne Viruses and Tuberculosis at European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC); **Dr. Ricardo Baptista Leite**, President and founder of UNITE - Parliamentarians Network for Global Health and **Ms. Martine Ingvorsen**, Policy Officer, Health Security and Vaccination, DG SANTE, European Commission.

Ms. Marianne Takki welcomed the Call to Action as a concrete outcome of the MEP Friends of the Liver event. She highlighted that the Commission is preparing a proposal for a Council Recommendation on vaccine preventable cancers, which is planned to be adopted later this year, which will reinforce the need for vaccination of children and at-risk adults. She recommended that member states make full use of the Joint Action on cancer and other NCDs including actions on health determinants. The Commission's Joint Research Centre must also consider the link between hepatitis and cancer in the ongoing revision of the European Code Against Cancer. Ms. Takki also mentioned that the Commission's Public Health Expert Group is prioritising key areas and good practices and might include viral hepatitis. The focus is on implementing and transferring good practices to ensure effective prevention measures are in place.

Prof. Maria Buti emphasised that the MEP Friends of the Liver Group is calling for the selection and sharing of good practices to address viral hepatitis, and the ACHIEVE coalition has already presented [Stories to Inspire](#), a collection of successful practices. She regretted that the EU is not on track to eliminate viral hepatitis by 2030 and therefore highlighted the importance of prioritising it in the Public Health Expert Group's work program. Furthermore she stressed the necessary use of EU4Health funds for detection and treatment, especially for at-risk groups like migrants and people who inject drugs. She stressed that the link between viral hepatitis and liver cancer needs to be recognised, and an updated European Code Against Cancer can help inform people about transmission and encourage

testing. She ended her intervention by suggesting that the EU Global Health Strategy also included hepatitis, as it is a major cause of morbidity and mortality.

Dr. Marieke Van Der Werf drew attention to the higher prevalence of viral hepatitis in the southern and eastern regions of the European Union. She noted that key populations for HBV, which include migrants and people who inject drugs, have the highest prevalence rates for the virus. However, she also cautioned that the interval for HBV prevalence is quite wide, indicating the need for more precise estimates. In the case of HCV, estimated prevalence rates are even higher. These figures underscore the importance of addressing viral hepatitis in the affected regions and populations, with a focus on prevention, testing, and treatment to reduce the burden of this disease. She also highlighted the challenges of patchy implementation of prevention services and the urgent need for better information and scaled up diagnosis and linkage to care.

Dr. Ricardo Baptista Leite emphasised that access to health is a fundamental human right and called for the strengthening of health systems to ensure that this right is upheld. Dr. Baptista Leite stressed the need for collaboration with patients, NGOs, and other stakeholders to ensure that efforts to address communicable diseases are effective and reach those in need. He also called for the inclusion of patients in the decision-making process, as their input is crucial to the success of any health intervention. Finally, he reminded the audience that governments have signed off on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include targets for reducing the burden of communicable diseases.

Ms. Martine Ingvorsen spoke on the importance of taking a holistic view when it comes to infectious diseases and vaccination. She stressed that we should avoid working in silos, but rather consider the full range of factors that contribute to the spread of disease and the effectiveness of immunisation programmes. In particular, Ms. Ingvorsen highlighted the importance of reliable data in informing interventions, while noting that the collection of data in member states is currently quite fragmented. This is especially true when it comes to vulnerable groups, where there are often data gaps that can make it difficult to inform effective interventions. In the context of vaccination, Ms. Ingvorsen emphasised the need to shift the focus away from perceptions and toward increasing actual immunisation rates. She also highlighted the challenge of reaching inmates and staff in prisons for vaccination and stressed the importance of finding innovative approaches to address this issue.

The panelists discussed the importance of political commitment and collaboration between various stakeholders, including policymakers, healthcare professionals, patient groups, and civil society, to achieve the goal of elimination. They highlighted the role of the EU in providing leadership, supporting research and innovation, and ensuring equitable access to prevention, testing, and treatment.