

A liver for life

The EU must take a leading role in the fight against liver disease, argues **Dominique-Charles Valla**

Writing in the last edition of the Parliament Magazine, Nadine Piorkowsky, president of the European liver patients association (ELPA) drew attention to the extremely worrying trend which the European association for the study of the liver (EASL), witnesses every day – the devastating effects of hepatitis B and C on our patients. These diseases kill “silently” because for years, often decades, patients do not feel the symptoms of their illness and remain undiagnosed. In fact, as a rule, patients come to us only when the obvious manifestations of liver disease occur and an irreversible stage of liver damage has already been reached.

If diagnosed in time, however, viral hepatitis patients can lead a perfectly normal and healthy life.

This is why we support ELPA's call for a council recommendation on hepatitis screening as a way to ensure that this disease is diagnosed and treated at an early stage. We also call on the World

Health Organisation (WHO) to make sure that it continues to put hepatitis on the global political agenda. It was unfortunate that the planned discussion on viral hepatitis at the 62nd annual meeting was postponed, but we hope that the WHO will not lose sight of the critical need to pursue this issue.

Tackling viral hepatitis is, however, only one step towards winning the fight against liver disease. Viral hepatitis is just one of several diseases which affect the liver. The majority of liver diseases are caused by the conjunction of multiple risk factors that have increased to epidemic proportions in recent decades. These include excess weight, alcohol consumption and aging – together they act to damage the liver progressively, but relentlessly. Crucially, each of these risk factors need not be pronounced to affect the liver: individuals face a risk of developing liver disease, for example, even when they are simply over weight (not necessarily obese) or when drinking moderately but regularly. This means that liver disease could affect any of us.

Chronic liver disease is now considered the EU's fifth biggest killer, accounting for at least one in six deaths in Europe today. Current estimates suggest that about 200 million European adults are overweight or obese and thus at serious risk of liver disease. Furthermore, harmful alcohol drinking patterns account



“Despite alarming trends, liver disease remains widely neglected in Europe”

for more than 195,000 deaths every year, many of which are related to liver disease.

Yet despite these alarming trends, liver disease remains widely neglected in Europe. Worse still, not only are policy makers unaware of the impact of the disease but there is frequently a false perception that liver disease is solely associated with drug and alcohol abuse – bringing with it stigma, misunderstanding and often an unwillingness to act.

It is for these reasons that EASL calls on the EU to take a leading role in the fight against liver disease. By increasing EU research funding for liver disease, urging the European centre for disease prevention and control to improve data collection, encouraging the implementation of screening measures and facilitating the exchange of best practice in the care and treatment of liver disease at national level, we may begin to tackle this disease across Europe.

The liver is for life. When dealing with this complex organ and its pathologies, EU public health and research policy must begin to look at the bigger picture. This requires the development and implementation of an all encompassing framework for awareness raising, screening, data collection, research, monitoring, prevention, care and treatment aimed at tackling the wide ranging diseases of the liver. ★

For further information visit www.easl.eu

Professor Dominique-Charles Valla is EU policy counsellor at the European association for the study of the liver (EASL)