



World Hepatitis Day 2008 in the European Parliament: “Am I Number 12?”

On World Hepatitis Day 2008, the European Liver Patients Association (ELPA), the European Association for the Study of the Liver (EASL) and EU policy-makers convened at the European Parliament in Strasbourg to discuss the burden of chronic viral hepatitis in Europe. Participants sought to assess the actions taken by the EU and its member states to combat this disease one year after the European Parliament adopted its Written Declaration on Hepatitis C. The Written Declaration calls, inter alia, for the adoption of a Council Recommendation on Hepatitis C screening. The discussion was hosted by Jolanta Dičkutė MEP and Thomas Ulmer MEP in cooperation with ELPA President Nadine Piorkowsky, and EASL Secretary General Jean-Michel Pawlotsky.

Am I number 12? campaign

The campaign slogan of this year's World Hepatitis Day – “Am I Number 12?” – captures the alarming reality that one in 12 people worldwide are affected by viral hepatitis. The “Am I Number 12?” campaign calls for the definition of international standards on screening, diagnosis, treatment and care for hepatitis patients as well as the allocation of EU funding for further research on hepatitis.



European Parliament Policy Debate

During a lunch debate on 20 May 2008 hosted by Jolanta Dičkutė MEP and Thomas Ulmer MEP in the European parliament in Strasbourg, ELPA and EASL presented 12 political “Asks” calling on the EU and its member states to take clear and decisive measures to tackle viral hepatitis in Europe.

Viral hepatitis in the EU

In their introduction to the debate, **Dr. Jolanta Dičkutė MEP** and **Dr. Thomas Ulmer MEP**

emphasised that even though last year's Written Declaration on Hepatitis C can be considered a great success (with 470 MEP having signed up to its objectives), it is now important to continue advocating for its implementation, specifically:

- Adoption of a Council Recommendation on Hepatitis C screening
- Increased protection of healthcare workers against needlestick injuries
- Further research on viral hepatitis under the 7th Research Framework Programme (FP7).



Surveillance of viral Hepatitis in Europe

During the lunch debate, **Dr. Marita van de Laar**, Project Leader for Sexually Transmitted Infections, HIV and Hepatitis at the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), provided an overview of a comprehensive system for data collection on hepatitis B and C in the EU. She stated that such a system is necessary for ensuring improved surveillance of viral hepatitis in Europe as well as comparability of national surveillance data. By reducing the differences, inconsistencies and gaps in the epidemiological

surveillance of viral hepatitis among member states, this system serves to harmonise the data sources, type and format of collected data and the frequency of data analysis. Dr. Van de Laar underlined that the ECDC is committed to the definition of EU-wide criteria for surveillance and called on Member States to gather and share reliable and useful data.



Targeted screening

Dr. Jean-Claude Desenclos, head of the Infectious Diseases Department at the *Institut de Veille Sanitaire* in France, stated that targeted screening of risk groups for hepatitis B and C, together with access to appropriate treatment, can contribute significantly to reducing the burden of viral hepatitis. Indeed, such targeted screening can effectively reduce the incidence of long-term complications of chronic viral hepatitis, such as cirrhosis and liver cancer, with an immediate effect in curbing the mortality peak.

Professor Daniel Camus, Director of the Department for the prevention of infectious diseases in the French Ministry of Health, pointed out that France is generally considered as an example of best practice in the fight against viral hepatitis, due to its broad range of policy measures in the area of screening. The French system targets risk groups and encourages them to get tested. These policies have resulted in effective hepatitis prevention programmes and a reduction of the hepatitis burden in France.

The role of the European Commission

Dr. Marianne Takki, Policy Officer, Unit SANCO C2 – Health Threats in the European Commission, provided the participants with an

overview of EU programmes and initiatives that address hepatitis, in particular the EU HIV/AIDS policy and the EU Drugs Strategy (2005-2012). In addition, she stated that a number of hepatitis-related projects are being financed under the EU public health and research programmes. Dr. Takki pointed out that specific diseases or cross-cutting health challenges can be addressed only through cooperation between member states and the EU's institutions and agencies. She underlined that member states are responsible for implementing public health actions and are thus key to promoting disease detection and screening and organising health services and treatment. Dr. Takki also stressed the importance of patient groups in reaching out to those at risk.



The protection of healthcare workers

Mr. Stephen Hughes MEP provided an update on the European Parliament's work in securing a greater degree of protection of healthcare workers from blood-borne infections due to needlestick injuries. He underlined that over 1 million people in the EU are affected by needlestick injuries each year. In particular, healthcare workers are at high risk of contracting more than 20 life-threatening viral diseases including hepatitis. Mr. Hughes called on the Commission to propose a legislative amendment to Directive 2000/54/EC on the protection of workers from risks related to exposure to biological agents at work in order to address the serious risks that healthcare workers face in their everyday work. He also called on the incoming French Presidency of the EU to make progress on this dossier, so as to achieve a radical reduction in the numbers of

blood-borne infections caused by needlestick injuries.

EU funding for viral hepatitis

Professor Jean-Michel Pawlotsky, EASL Secretary General, called on the EU to take stock of the increasing burden of viral hepatitis both in the developed and in the developing world and to recognise hepatitis as one of the major communicable diseases alongside HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria and to address it as such in its health and development policies. He recalled that hepatitis B and C rank seventh and tenth respectively on the list of the ten main infectious causes of death and are responsible for 1 million deaths worldwide every year. Prof. Pawlotsky also underlined the need for the EU to recognise viral hepatitis as a key priority of the research policy and called on the Commission to include liver-related research projects in the upcoming calls for proposals under its current research Framework Programme.



The needs of patient groups

ELPA President, **Nadine Piorkowsky**, pointed to the high number of undiagnosed cases of viral hepatitis in Europe and spoke of the patients who learn of their illness years, or even decades, after becoming infected, by which time they already suffer from cirrhosis or cancer. ELPA's principal goals are to promote early diagnosis and treatment of viral hepatitis as well as to reduce the number of new infections. In order to achieve this, there is a need for policy-makers to adopt and implement policies which ensure increased public awareness, education and training of healthcare professionals and improved and targeted outreach to those at risk. Whilst Mrs.

Piorkowsky agreed with Dr. Takki that the execution of these tasks was in the hands of Member States, she pointed to the need for EU guidance in the form of a Council Recommendation on viral hepatitis, aimed at addressing the great inequalities across the EU member states.



Towards a Council Recommendation on hepatitis screening

Concluding the meeting, Dr. Dičkutė and Dr. Ulmer urged the Council and the Commission to work on the adoption of an EU Council Recommendation on Viral Hepatitis Screening. They also called on the Slovenian Presidency to recognise viral hepatitis as a major communicable disease alongside HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria. They stressed the importance of recognising viral hepatitis B and C as the leading infectious causes of cancer in its draft Council Conclusions in June 2008, together with a call on member states to take action towards preventing liver cancer through vaccination, early diagnosis and adequate treatment of viral hepatitis.



About ELPA

ELPA emerged from a desire amongst European liver patient groups to share their experiences of the often very different approaches adopted in different countries. ELPA was formally launched in Paris on April 14th 2005 during the annual conference of the European Association for the Study of the Liver (EASL) and now has 20 members from 17 countries. ELPA's aim is to promote the interests of people with liver disease by furthering awareness and prevention among healthcare professionals, policymakers and the public at large; by addressing the low profile of liver disease compared to other disease areas; by sharing experience of successful case examples as regards the management of the disease; by working with professional bodies such as EASL to ensure that treatment and care are aligned across Europe to the highest standards.

Find out more about ELPA at: <http://www.elpa-info.org>.

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About EASL

EASL is the leading pan-European association of medical professionals dedicated to promoting liver research and care. Through its work, EASL aims to promote research in the field of liver diseases and the education of physicians and scientists as well as to improve public awareness of liver diseases and their management.

For more information on EASL, please consult our website: www.easl.ch or contact:

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