

World Hepatitis Day 2023

World Hepatitis Day is observed every year on 28 July to raise awareness of viral hepatitis, this year's theme is "One life, One liver". It emphasizes the significance of preserving and safeguarding our liver health, through taking proactive steps towards maintaining liver health and encouraging governments, healthcare providers and organisations to continue efforts to accelerate hepatitis tests and treatment.

This year WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia hosted two hours virtual meeting on 28th July 2023 (world hepatitis day). In this event, Ministers of Health from countries in the Asia Region presented their views on the country's update on hepatitis including challenges and way forward. The high-level decision makers like principal secretaries of the national hepatitis programme, AIDS programme in the Ministries of Health (MoH) and representatives of the community-based and civil society organizations were also invited. From NAPUD, the Regional coordinator participated in the event as the regional "community voice".

ONE LIFE ONE LIVER
High-level leadership event, 28 July 2023, 1430 to 1630 hours (IST) | **WORLD HEPATITIS DAY 2023**

Dr Meg Doherty
Director, Global HIV, Hepatitis and STI programme at WHO HQ

Dr Markior Newman Owiredu
Medical Officer, Treatment and Care Team Global HIV, Hepatitis and STIs programmes at WHO HQ

Dr Suchada Jiamsiri
Medical Officer, Division of AIDS and STIs, Department of Disease Control, Ministry of Public Health, Thailand.

Dr Cherian V. Varghese
Coordinator (Noncommunicable Diseases and Determinants-NDD) WHO SEARO

Mr Francis Joseph
Regional Coordinator of NAPUD

Mr KC Praewchan
Senior Program Manager of SPARSHA

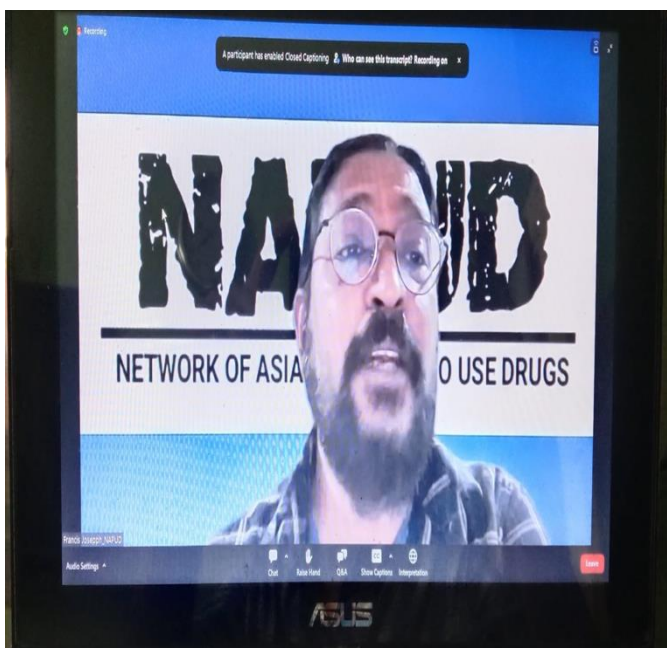
Ms Caroline Thomas
Founder and project director of Yayasan Peduli Hati Bangsa

Join Zoom Meeting - <https://who.zoom.us/j/97894649257>
Meeting ID: 978 9464 9257
Passcode: who@2023

World Health Organization
REGIONAL OFFICE South-East Asia

My name is Francis Joseph and I represent the Regional Network of Asian People who Use Drugs. I thank the WHO SEARO team for giving me this platform to share my views on the Hepatitis situation, and the community's role in ending hepatitis and needs.

WHO, Global progress report on HIV, viral hepatitis and STIs 2021 spells out that of the 58 million people living with Hepatitis C virus worldwide; out of it, 34% (20 million) are



people living in the Asia Pacific region. Similarly of the 296 million people infected by Viral Hepatitis B worldwide, 59% of this (176 million) people are living in the Asia Pacific region alone. The data reveals that Asia is a hotspot for viral hepatitis alone and is home to approximately 200 million people and therefore a significant public health concern in Asia. This is a critical area which needs immediate attention and concentrated efforts. We are still struggling to incorporate viral hepatitis within the national strategic plans in many Asian countries due to the lack of estimation of the disease burden. People who use and inject drugs and other key population groups have

largely been left behind in this whole response due to several risk factors that contribute to the burden of hepatitis in Asia. It is necessary to protect public health first, then combat drug-related crimes, the unethical "war on drugs" has led to human rights abuses and disproportionate physical, mental, social, and psychological harm to us.

There is a Lack of awareness about viral hepatitis among people who use and inject drugs and their limited access to harm reduction and healthcare services can lead to underdiagnosis and late detection of infections. Infections are on the rise and are affecting people of all ages and backgrounds, robbing them of their health and productivity. This factor leads to Stigma and Discrimination associated with hepatitis that hinders efforts to control the spread of the virus and discourages individuals from seeking testing and treatment. This call for an urgent need to address the stigma and discrimination associated with viral hepatitis to encourage individuals to seek testing, treatment, and support.

Improving access to affordable and effective treatment options for individuals diagnosed with hepatitis B and C. Access to affordable and effective treatment for hepatitis is crucial in reducing the burden of the disease. However, in some parts of the Asian region, treatment options may be limited or too costly for many individuals. Countries that have incorporated treatment of Viral Hepatitis in their health plan regularly encounter issues of stockouts, not only of medicines but testing kits, diagnostics etc.

Another area for intervention and focus can be expanding vaccination coverage, especially for hepatitis B, to protect the most vulnerable groups of people who use and inject drugs, their partners and including newborns. Vaccination against hepatitis B is one of the most effective ways to prevent the spread of the virus. However, the coverage of hepatitis B vaccination varies across countries in the region, and some areas still have low vaccination rates. This is due to the lack of commitment of the government which considers Hepatitis B vaccination as an important prevention component within harm reduction.

The current requirement is raising awareness about hepatitis, its transmission, prevention and treatment through media campaigns, community outreach, and educational programs. We (the Regional Network of Asian People who use drugs) understand that our healthcare systems are already overburdened, and viral hepatitis only adds to the strain. As the disease progresses, it places a heavy demand on medical facilities, healthcare providers, and essential resources. Therefore, the need is to implement awareness programs and put prevention strategies into practice. There is a need for Regional Solidarity as **viral hepatitis knows no borders**. It requires a united front with shared knowledge, resources, and expertise. We must collaborate across countries, and learn the best practices from experiences to achieve a meaningful impact. Delaying our response means more suffering and preventable deaths. We cannot afford to lose any more time.

We need to focus on evidence-based strategies that have proven successful in other regions. Prevention through vaccination, access to adequate numbers of needles & syringes through harm reduction services, and comprehensive testing and treatment programs are key components. Hep C can be diagnosed, treated and cured for as low as 50-80 USD per patient. Adequate financing is the backbone of successful elimination efforts. We must invest in prevention, testing, treatment, and public awareness campaigns. Financial commitment now will yield substantial returns in the future by saving lives and reducing healthcare costs. Therefore, governments need to consider this

on a serious note on making treatment free for all as people are bearing heavy costs for their treatments in many SE Asian countries.

We call upon policymakers, healthcare professionals, and civil society to amplify the urgency of this issue. We need everyone's support to make viral hepatitis elimination a priority on national and regional agendas and we urge the WHO, the UN organisations and all allies and partners to join hands, accelerate our efforts, and commit to financing the fight against viral hepatitis. We Demand testing & Treatment now. By acting now, we can create a healthier, more resilient world for generations to come. Together, we can and will achieve elimination!