

World Hepatitis Day (28 July 2017)

Statement by Vytenis Andriukaitis, EU Commissioner for Health and Food Safety

Today some 5.5 million people in the EU suffer from Hepatitis C. The sad truth is that in reality this number may be much higher. Because it is often difficult to note the symptoms until a late stage and because it predominantly affects the poor and vulnerable, e.g. injecting drug users, Hepatitis C is known as the "silent" epidemic. The reality is also quite grim due to the prohibitively expensive medicines to treat this disease, yet the Hepatitis is a preventable disease - if only we focused more on prevention we wouldn't need so much cure.

We know what needs to be done: more testing, screening and awareness-raising – particularly amongst vulnerable groups - timely diagnosis, early detection and adequate treatment. Member States have committed to achieve the Sustainable Development goal of ending HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis and reducing viral hepatitis by 2030. On the EU level, we in the European Commission remain fully committed to helping them as we have underlined in our Communication – 'Next steps for a sustainable European future'.

We are supporting global health initiatives such as the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. We have also recently signed a Joint Statement on the European Consensus on Development, which commits the EU and its Member States to continue to invest in preventing and combating communicable diseases, and securing affordable and essential medicines and vaccines for all. The Consensus is our key external tool to implement the 2030 Agenda in our development cooperation. The Commission is also strongly committed to continuing to support research into viral hepatitis and the development of preventive and therapeutic tools under the Horizon 2020 programme.

We also want to continue fostering cooperation at EU level. The Commission has extended the ongoing work with EU countries and stakeholders on HIV/AIDS, hepatitis and tuberculosis to scale up prevention and testing programmes, address social inequalities and ensure access to screening and care for all. We will use the EU Health Programme to support action, in particular to target the most vulnerable. For example a new Joint Action on improving the quality of prevention and care for HIV/AIDS, viral hepatitis, tuberculosis and sexually transmitted infections should be launched later this year. In addition, Member States are invited to use the Joint Procurement Agreement to help them obtain medicines under more favourable conditions.

I strongly believe that effective prevention, treatment and care of hepatitis should become standard practice across Europe. On this year's World Hepatitis Day it is worth not only keep on reminding ourselves that we have the tools to succeed but really work together so that ultimately we can stamp out this "silent" epidemic. Together we can eradicate Hepatitis in Europe.