



THE AIDS INSTITUTE

PUBLIC COMMENT

by

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before the

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FOR THE 67TH WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY

OFFICE OF GLOBAL AFFAIRS

US DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

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Good afternoon. The AIDS Institute is pleased to offer our comments on the World Health Organization's (WHO) Report by the Secretariat titled "[Hepatitis: Improving the health of patients with Hepatitis](#)" (EB134/36) and the [proposed resolution on Hepatitis](#) (EB134.R18), which will be considered at the 67th World Health Assembly later this month in Geneva.

As a person living with chronic hepatitis B and on behalf of The AIDS Institute, we commend the WHO for identifying viral hepatitis as a significant global public health problem and the need for governments and populations to take action to prevent, diagnose and treat viral hepatitis, and the need to develop and implement a comprehensive global strategy.

As clearly stated in the WHO Report on Hepatitis, viral hepatitis is responsible for 1.4 million deaths each year and around 500 million people are living with the disease, including millions who are also living with HIV. Unfortunately most of the people living with hepatitis B and C are unaware of their infection and are at serious risk of developing cirrhosis or liver cancer.

Clearly, governments throughout the world must do more to prevent hepatitis, as proposed in the resolution, including increased hepatitis A & B vaccination programs and harm reduction policies. The resolution also calls for the need for improved surveillance and testing programs. Hepatitis is often referred to as the "silent epidemic" since people infected with hepatitis often are not aware of their infection until they develop symptoms. Only through widespread testing efforts will people learn of their status.

After someone learns of their status they can then take advantage of the treatments for hepatitis B and C, which prevent disease progression and now, with the advent of direct-acting antivirals

for hepatitis C, can actually result in a cure. These regimens are not only extremely effective against the virus but they are much easier on the patient, as well.

People with hepatitis C, both here in the United State and throughout the world, are extremely excited about the prospect of these new medications and have been awaiting treatment. Due to the initial demand for the medications and the price of the drug in the U.S, these drugs have attracted great attention. Some assume that everyone with hepatitis C will immediately take these drugs, but while demand may initially be very high, we must remember most people with hepatitis C are not aware they are infected and will not be accessing treatment at this time.

There is much optimism, and some are even talking about the possibility of eliminating hepatitis B and C, which through vaccination, treatment and other prevention efforts could be possible. For these reasons, we are highly supportive of the suggestion in the resolution that requests the Director-General “to examine the feasibility of and strategies needed for the elimination of hepatitis B and hepatitis C with a view to potentially setting global targets.”

For the reasons we have already outlined, we believe the U.S government should be highly supportive of the Hepatitis resolution at the upcoming World Health Assembly meeting. We do have a concern with the resolution and that pertains to provisions calling for national legislative mechanisms and technical assistance to provide flexibilities in the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) to promote access to pharmaceutical products. Additionally, we question the inclusion of the statement “to consider, whenever, necessary, the use of administrative and legal means in order to promote access to...treatment technologies...”

We recognize the need to protect patents and hope that in efforts to reduce the price of medications in countries in which they cannot be afforded; respect for patent rights will be honored. It appears that one of the companies is offering its hepatitis C drug in Egypt, which has one of the highest numbers of infections in the world, at a discount of 99 percent of the U.S. price. According to press reports, the same low price is being offered in other countries such as India and Brazil, and the company has plans to license the same drug to generic manufacturers. This is occurring while remaining respectful of patents and intellectual property. This respect is what led to the development of these remarkable new medications and others that are expected to offer cures to people living with hepatitis C throughout the world, and we hope it will continue.

We thank you for this opportunity to offer our comments and look forward to hearing the results of what we hope will be a productive World Health Assembly and a greater global attention to viral hepatitis.

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