

**Canadian Coalition of Organizations  
Responding to Hepatitis B and C**

**Coalition des organisations vouées à  
l'hépatite B et à l'hépatite C**

# News Release Communiqué

For immediate release

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## **Canadian Coalition of Organizations Responding to Hepatitis B and C Calls on Governments to Take Urgent Action to Tackle Chronic Viral Hepatitis B & C Epidemic**

**May 12, 2010** - In recognition of the third World Hepatitis Day (WHD) on May 19, members of the newly formed *Canadian Coalition of Organizations Responding to Hepatitis B and C* (“the Coalition”) join the World Hepatitis Alliance to call on Canadian federal, provincial and territorial governments to adopt measures that address the international and national epidemic from a public health perspective.

More specifically, **the Coalition urges the Canadian government to adopt a fully-funded coordinated national strategy for both Hepatitis B and C by 2012 that:**

- 1. Promotes prevention** of hepatitis B and C through expanded education, immunization and harm reduction programs all across Canada.
- 2. Improves access** to comprehensive care and treatment programs in all areas of the country.
- 3. Increases knowledge and innovation** through interdisciplinary research and surveillance to reduce the burden of hepatitis B and C on Canadians.
- 4. Creates awareness** about risk factors, stigma and the need for testing among the general population and at-risk groups.
- 5. Builds capacity** through training and recruitment of qualified health professionals.
- 6. Supports communities and community-based groups** in developing, delivering and evaluating peer-driven and focused initiatives.

**The Coalition also urges the Canadian government to support the important resolution on viral hepatitis which will be debated by the 193 WHO Member States at the 63rd World Health Assembly in Geneva from 17 May – 21 May, 2010.** This is the first time that viral hepatitis has been discussed at this level and is a huge opportunity to begin the policy changes necessary to improve awareness, prevention, diagnosis, care, support and access to treatment of the diseases.

Coalition members believe that Canada has a unique opportunity to lead by example by taking action at home as it supports the international resolution.

Hepatitis B and C are viral infections that attack the liver and can lead to scarring of the liver (cirrhosis), cancer, the need for transplantation and even death. These are chronic, lifelong and life threatening diseases that can affect anyone from any walk of life.

600,000 Canadians are infected with hepatitis B or C and approximately 240,000 are not aware of their infection. Early diagnosis, healthy lifestyle, and treatment can improve and lengthen lives for those living with hepatitis B and C, yet few people know the risk factors or symptoms. Due to the stigma attached to hepatitis—sometimes associated with drug use, sexual promiscuity, and poor hygiene—many people are scared to get tested or to seek treatment.

Moreover, in Canada, there is no national strategy or comprehensive system for care, treatment, and prevention of hepatitis B and C. Access to timely treatments is poor and inconsistent from one province to another. This is unacceptable for a country that prides itself on its publicly-funded universal health care system. Hepatitis B and C patients need access to the most effective care and treatment options regardless of geographic location or socio-economic status. Policies need to be changed so that those needing treatment can get it quickly.

The magnitude of the burden on healthcare from these preventable and treatable diseases is why hepatitis has been referred to as “The Silent Epidemic”, “The Viral Time bomb”, “Sleeping Giant” and “Epidemic Titanic.”

“The Canadian government needs to understand that if not tackled today, both hepatitis B and C will be major burdens on the healthcare system in the next 20 years as today’s patients will suffer complications, develop liver cancer or require liver transplants,” says Dr. Morris Sherman, hepatologist at Toronto General Hospital and Chair of the Canadian Liver Foundation. “We need all levels of government to act today on a national strategy that recognizes the unique nature of hepatitis B and C.” Dr. Sherman adds, “liver cancer is most frequently a result of hepatitis B and C and its incidence is increasing more rapidly than any other cancer. Proper care can prevent or cure this cancer, but due to the lack of a national strategy the majority of patients who develop liver cancer will die from their disease.”

Canadian taxpayers will inevitably bear the financial and social costs of hepatitis B and C but the costs can be minimized through action taken now. The time for action is now! Canadians with hepatitis B and C want World Hepatitis Day 2010 to mark a change in hepatitis policy in Canada.

We are asking the government of Canada to take a leadership role in creating a national strategy that by 2012 will address the issues that are contributing to the suffering and death of so many Canadians.

**About the Canadian Coalition of Organizations Responding to Hepatitis B and C:**

The Canadian Coalition of Hepatitis B and C is made up of many groups and individuals who believe hepatitis B and C are being ignored and that Canadians with these diseases are being treated unfairly. On World Hepatitis Day, the Coalition asks you to learn more about this disease and to lobby your government for fairness and increased access to comprehensive care and treatment. The newly formed group is made up of individuals, healthcare professionals and organizations. Member organizations are listed on the Coalition's website.

More information can be found at: [www.canadianhepatitiscoalition.ca](http://www.canadianhepatitiscoalition.ca)

**About World Hepatitis Day:**

World Hepatitis Day events are planned across the country on and around May 19 to educate Canadians about these potentially life threatening liver diseases and to push for changes to government policy that will ease access to treatment. More information on the activities planned in Canada can be found at [www.whdcanada.ca](http://www.whdcanada.ca)

**About World Hepatitis Alliance**

The World Hepatitis Alliance provides global leadership and supports action that will halt the death toll and improve the lives of people living with chronic viral hepatitis B and C. Through better awareness, prevention, care, support and access to treatment, our ultimate goal is to work with governments to eradicate these diseases from the planet. The World Hepatitis Alliance is a Non-Governmental Organization representing more than 280 hepatitis B and C patient groups from around the world. The World Hepatitis Alliance is governed by a representative board elected by patient groups from seven world regions: Europe, Eastern Mediterranean, Africa, North America, Latin America, Australasia and Western Pacific. For further information visit: [www.worldhepatitisalliance.org](http://www.worldhepatitisalliance.org)

**About the World Health Assembly resolution**

Following extensive lobbying from the World Hepatitis Alliance and patient groups around the world, the 34 country World Health Organization (WHO) Executive Board members reached consensus on a resolution which recognizes the global impact of viral hepatitis and the need for action. Proposed by Brazil and co-sponsored by Indonesia and Colombia, it gives support to an official World Hepatitis Day to provide a focus for national and international awareness-raising efforts. The resolution will be debated by the 193 WHO Member States at the 63rd World Health Assembly in Geneva from 17 May – 21 May, 2010. This is the first time that viral hepatitis has been discussed at this level and is a huge opportunity to begin the policy changes necessary to improve awareness, prevention, diagnosis, care, support and access to treatment of the diseases.

If the resolution was adopted by the World Health Assembly, it would:

- Provide a clear statement that viral hepatitis now has a high global priority and has to be tackled globally
- Establish an official WHO World Hepatitis Day
- Provide a mandate for the WHO to coordinate responses to viral hepatitis at a global level
- Represent a clear commitment by governments to strengthen their response to viral hepatitis, which patient groups would then be able to use to encourage changes in policy and practice at a national level

A copy of the proposed resolution can be found at:

[http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf\\_files/EB126/B126\\_R16-en.pdf](http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/EB126/B126_R16-en.pdf)

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