

Canadian Coalition of Organizations Responding to Hepatitis B and C

Media release : For immediate release

Également disponible en français

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New Report Card concludes: Canada must adopt National Hepatitis Strategy to Fight Current Epidemic

July 27, 2011– Findings of a national *2011 Hepatitis Strategy Report Card* on government strategies developed to address hepatitis B and C prevention, treatment and support indicate that a more concerted effort must be undertaken to achieve an effective national hepatitis strategy, says the Canadian Coalition of Organizations Responding to Hepatitis B and C.

The Report Card, prepared by the Coalition, assessed the strategies implemented by each province and territory as well as the federal government to address and to take action on hepatitis B and C, and found that there is a lack of collaboration and coordination between the governments in Canada that needs to be addressed.

There is no national strategy or comprehensive system for care, treatment, and prevention of hepatitis B and C, and access to timely treatments is inadequate and inconsistent from one jurisdiction to another. “Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C treatment are generally available, but not uniformly in all Canadian regions or in all correctional settings. More specialists are needed and waiting time needs to be reduced,” the Coalition concludes.

Growing epidemic and costs

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, about 600,000 Canadians are living with hepatitis B and / or hepatitis C. Each year, 5,000 Canadians are newly infected with hepatitis C; in 2007 alone, nearly 8,000 people were infected. PHAC estimated that in 2010, the annual cost of hepatitis C due to medical treatment and lost productivity in this country would reach \$1 billion. Unless more effective strategies are implemented to address the hepatitis epidemic, says the Coalition, the cost to the Canadian public health care system will continue to soar.

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.

Of the 600,000 Canadians infected with hepatitis B or C, 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.

In acknowledging World Hepatitis Day (WHD), July 28, members of the Canadian Coalition of Organizations Responding to Hepatitis B and C reflect the call by the World Hepatitis Alliance and the World Health Organization (WHO) for coordinated efforts in all countries to ensure that viral hepatitis prevention, treatment and support is addressed.

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 will satisfy the following Six National Asks:**

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

“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. Canadians with hepatitis B and C want World Hepatitis Day 2011 to mark a change in hepatitis policy in Canada.

The Coalition urges the government of Canada and provincial and territorial governments to take a leadership role in creating a national strategy by 2012 that will address the issues and gaps identified in the *2011 Hepatitis Strategy Report Card* that are contributing to the suffering and death of so many Canadians.

Contact Information:

More information, including the full Report Card and executive summary, can be found at: www.canadianhepatitiscoalition.ca

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BACKGROUND

About the Six National Asks

Since 2008, countries, organizations and individuals have worked collaboratively to develop and disseminate the "12 Asks," a series of requests for governments to take action on hepatitis prevention, treatment and support. These comprised six international Asks and six national Asks specific to individual countries. The requests were to be presented to governments for action by 2012. (For more information on the 12 Asks, please go to: www.worldhepatitisalliance.org/Policy/12_Ask.aspx)

In 2009, recognizing that Canada did not have a national strategy or comprehensive system for addressing hepatitis B and C, the Canadian Coalition of Organizations Responding to Hepatitis B and C was born. The Coalition set out to ask provincial, territorial and federal governments to respond to these Asks by the year 2012.

This year, the Coalition developed and is publishing, for World Hepatitis Day, the *2011 Hepatitis Strategy Report Card* whose findings underscore the need for a national strategy and a comprehensive system across the country for addressing hepatitis B and C. The goal is to provide government and other stakeholders with a high-level snapshot of important areas of concern regarding hepatitis B and C and how we are faring in addressing those concerns. These findings, it is hoped, will help in providing direction for the development of a national hepatitis strategy for all Canadians.

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

The Canadian Coalition of Organizations Responding to Hepatitis B and C unites organizations and individuals to focus increased attention on the response to hepatitis B and C. For more information, go to: www.canadianhepatitiscoalition.ca

About World Hepatitis Day:

The fourth annual World Hepatitis Day will take place on Thursday, July 28, 2011, as part of an ongoing campaign launched by the World Hepatitis Alliance in 2008. This is the first year that the World Health Organization (WHO) has endorsed World Hepatitis Day. The 2011 theme for World Hepatitis Day is '*This is hepatitis... Know it. Confront it. Hepatitis affects everyone, everywhere.*'

This theme complements '*Am I Number 12?*' which remains the principle awareness-raising campaign of the World Hepatitis Alliance and has been a central component of the World Hepatitis Day movement since its launch. This inclusive theme emphasizes the scale of viral hepatitis (1 in 12 of the global population is chronically infected with hepatitis B or C) and helps combat the stigma often associated with hepatitis B and C by conveying the fact that these viruses do not discriminate.

World Hepatitis Day events are planned across Canada 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

About World Hepatitis Alliance

The World Hepatitis Alliance is a not-for-profit international umbrella Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) whose membership is composed of organizations working in the field of viral hepatitis. As a coalition of advocacy groups, the World Hepatitis Alliance is a global voice for the 500 million people worldwide living with chronic viral hepatitis B or 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. For further information visit: www.worldhepatitisalliance.org

WHO Endorsement of World Hepatitis Day

World Hepatitis Day is the principal hepatitis awareness event on the global healthcare calendar and became an official World Health Organization (WHO) day in 2010 with the passing of World Health Assembly resolution WHA63.18. The WHO is now working with the Alliance as a collaborating partner on World Hepatitis Day 2011. In recognition of the birthday of Professor Baruch Blumberg, who won the Nobel Prize for discovering the hepatitis B virus, WHO decided that World Hepatitis Day should take place on July 28. Sadly, Professor Blumberg died in April 2011, and this will add further poignancy to the date this year. A copy of the proposed resolution can be found at: http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/EB126/B126_R16-en.pdf

July 27, 2011

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