

71st Session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe
Joint Statement delivered by the European Association for the Study of the Liver (EASL)
Reinventing primary health care in the post-COVID-19 era

Chair,

The European Association for the Study of the Liver (EASL) is delivering this statement together with the support of the European Cancer Organisation, the Thalassemia International Federation and the World Federation of Chiropractic.

The European Association for the Study of the Liver (EASL) is strongly engaged with the WHO goal of eliminating viral hepatitis throughout Europe and recognise the substantial impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic on the care of patients with chronic viral hepatitis.

Data from European countries and other countries globally have already shown that the past year marked by the COVID-19 pandemic has hindered the progress on viral hepatitis elimination and increased the risk of developing cancer of the liver.

In 2020 there was an overall decline in the screening and diagnoses of Chronic viral hepatitis assessed by the the number of Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) and Hepatitis B Virus (HBV) tests performed, consultations undertaken, and new treatments provided, which has suffered severe disruptions. Viral Hepatitis elimination must stay a priority on the political agenda.

WHO has adopted several strategies for communicable disease elimination, including HBV and HCV by 2030. However, in many European countries progress in elimination of viral hepatitis is lacking and the 2030 elimination targets are in jeopardy. The European Center for Disease Control (ECDC) indicated that most countries are not on track for HCV elimination and even less for HBV elimination, thus the target will not be reached if the gaps in prevention (harm reduction, vaccination), diagnosis and treatment are not urgently addressed.

EASL welcomes the draft resolution on primary health care and would like to reiterate the crucial role of primary health care towards the elimination of viral hepatitis. We urge WHO to ensure that needed investments are made. A strong primary health care is the foundation of effective health systems that deliver essential and routine health care services to avoid preventable illnesses and deaths. To achieve HBV and HCV elimination by 2030, the support of a strong primary health care system with effective screening, prevention, early diagnosing and treatment practices will be essential.

EASL has two specific asks:

1. Support investments in primary health care as we recover from COVID-19, governments must prioritize investments in PHC.
2. Support that viral hepatitis elimination remains a priority on the political agenda.

Finally, let's see the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to reinvent better primary health care, which is fairer and more resilient.

Thank you.