

73rd Session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe

European Association for the Study of the Liver (EASL) – Statement on Agenda item 7 – Action plan for refugee and migrant health in the WHO European region 2023-2030

11 October 2023

Dear Chair,

The European Association for the Study of the Liver welcomes the Action plan regarding equity in refugee and migrant health in the WHO European region 2023-2030. EASL supports this timely initiative and the five guiding principles of the plan. These evidence-based pillars provide focus on concrete priority areas for action which are necessary for ensuring all people within the region are receiving timely and quality healthcare.

As the foremost hepatology organisation in Europe, EASL would like to express the crucial need to include perspectives from chronic liver disease care in the action plan. Liver diseases include those due to infectious diseases such as viral hepatitis B, C, and Delta and noncommunicable diseases including metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease (MASLD) and alcohol-related liver disease (ARLD).

Migrants can acquire viral hepatitis in their native countries and are frequently unaware of their infective and/or liver disease status; however, studies have shown that migrants often acquire or contract liver diseases during their migration or once they have arrived and settled in the European Union (EU). The rate of HBV infection among migrants born in endemic countries has been reported at 6% compared to the 1% in the general population. These cases can be traced back to poor living conditions in refugee centres; for example, Amnesty International described Greek camp conditions as “appalling” and falling far below minimum EU standards.

When entering the EU, point-of-care testing tends to be inadequate. Many countries focus solely on single-disease testing (e.g., tuberculosis) and exclude testing for viral hepatitis. After arrival at their point of entry, migrants often continue their journey to other countries. Many European countries have guidelines on infection testing and vaccination; however, they have a limited focus on migrants and a disconnection between the recommendations and clinical implementation.

Once settled, many migrants lack appropriate information regarding their rights to healthcare and access to non-emergency care. This results in many avoiding healthcare settings for fear of being reported to immigration and others not receiving the treatments they need for chronic or non-emergency health challenges.

The acceptability of screening and treatment is low due to cultural insensitivity, low health literacy, and lack of knowledge pertinent to infection, screening, and vaccination. Stigma and fear of disclosure, competing non-health concerns, and the complexity of current models of care all present barriers to migrant groups.

During the 73rd Session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe, EASL asks that the following be included on the Action plan for refugee and migrant health 2023-2030:

- European countries must improve reception facilities for migrants to remove preventable sources of viral hepatitis infection and should implement point-of-care testing which includes HBV and HCV testing and providing linkage to care for treatment.

- All migrants arriving in the EU should be given comprehensive information about their rights to accessing healthcare and given resources to address language and cultural barriers and risks of arriving in the new country (alcohol access, behavioural risks for acquiring viral infections, unhealthy lifestyles, etc.).
- Healthcare professionals cannot be required to report undocumented migrants to the police or immigration authorities. A holistic and inclusive approach to undocumented migrant health needs to be adopted in EU countries with rules and regulations in place to safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of migrant patients.

Healthcare is a human right – migrants and asylum seekers should not be excluded from health systems, nor should they be deterred in any way from accessing the services and treatments they need.

Thank you.



The European Association for the Study of the Liver mission aims to be the Home of Hepatology so that all who are involved with treating liver disease can realise their full potential to cure and prevent it. The purpose of the association is to promote communication between European workers interested in the liver and its disorders. In particular, the association strives to:

- *Promote research concerning the liver*
- *Promote education of physicians, scientists, and public awareness of liver diseases and their management*
- *Act as an advisor to European and national health authorities concerning liver diseases, provision of clinical services and the need for research funding*
- *Foster European multicentre controlled trials*
- *Facilitate scientific exchange*
- *Facilitate the participation of Young Investigators at its meetings*