GENEVA ¦ 24 July 2013 -- On **World Hepatitis Day** (**28 July**), the World Health Organization (WHO) is urging **governments to act against the five hepatitis viruses** that can cause severe **liver infections** and lead to 1.4 million deaths every year. Some of these hepatitis viruses, most notably types B and C, can also lead to chronic and debilitating illnesses such as liver cancer and cirrhosis, in addition to loss of income and high medical expenses for hundreds of millions of people worldwide.

Viral hepatitis is referred to as a 'silent epidemic' because most persons do not realize that they are infected and, over decades, slowly progress to liver disease. Many countries are only now realizing the magnitude of the disease burden and devising ways to address it.

"The fact that many hepatitis B and C infections are silent, causing no symptoms until there is severe damage to the liver, points to the urgent need for universal access to immunization, screening, diagnosis and antiviral therapy," says Dr Keiji Fukuda, WHO Assistant Director-General for Health Security and the Environment.

This year, in the run up to World Hepatitis Day, the Organization is releasing its first-ever country hepatitis survey, covering 126 countries. The *WHO Global policy report on the prevention and control or viral hepatitis in WHO Member States* identifies successes as well as gaps at country level in the implementation of four priority areas. The priority areas are raising awareness, evidence-based data for action, prevention of transmission, and screening, care and treatment.

The findings show that 37% of the countries have national strategies for viral hepatitis, and more work is needed in treating hepatitis. It also highlights that while most of the countries (82%) have established hepatitis surveillance programmes, only half of them include the monitoring of chronic hepatitis B and C, which are responsible for most severe illnesses and deaths.

"Many of the measures needed to prevent the spread of viral hepatitis disease can be put in place right now and, and doing so will offset the heavy economic costs of treating and hospitalizing patients in future," says Dr Sylvie Briand, Director, Pandemic and Epidemic Diseases at WHO. "The findings underline the important work that is being done by governments to halt hepatitis through the implementation of WHO recommended policies and actions."

The challenges posed by hepatitis were formally acknowledged by the World Health Assembly in 2010 when, it adopted its first resolution on viral hepatitis, and called for a comprehensive approach to prevention and control. This has promoted a new era of awareness with more

governments proactively working to address the disease. Reinforcing that call for action, WHO has been collaborating closely with countries and partners to build a strong global response. As a result, the new report notes, 38% of countries observe World Hepatitis Day (an annual event that began in 2010) with even more countries expected to mark the day this year.

In addition to collaborating closely with countries, WHO has been working on developing networks and mechanisms that can deliver results. The Organization is exploring with international funding agencies avenues that could allow hepatitis to be included in their current programme of activities. In June 2013, WHO launched the Global Hepatitis Network. One of its aims is to support countries with planning and implementation of viral hepatitis plans and programmes.

WHO is currently developing new hepatitis C screening, care and treatment guidelines, which will provide recommendations on seven key areas such as testing approaches; behavioural interventions (alcohol reduction); non-invasive assessment of liver fibrosis; and the selection of hepatitis C drug combinations.

”New, more effective medicines to prevent the progression of chronic hepatitis B and C are in the pipeline. However, these will be expensive and therapy will require monitoring with sophisticated laboratory tests. To cure and reduce the spread of these viruses, medicines must become more accessible,” says Dr Stefan Wiktor, Team lead of WHO’s Global Hepatitis Programme.

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Additional background information:

The complexity of hepatitis disease lies in the existence of different types of viruses. Hepatitis A and E are foodborne and waterborne infections which cause millions of cases of acute illness every year, sometimes with several months needed for a person to fully recovery.

Hepatitis B, C, and D are spread by infected body fluids including blood, by sexual contact, mother-to-child transmission during birth, or by contaminated medical equipment. Hepatitis B and C have a greater health burden in terms of death because they can cause life-long infection (called chronic infection), which can lead to liver cirrhosis and cancer. In fact, chronic hepatitis is the leading cause of liver cirrhosis and cancer.

WHO-approved vaccines are available to prevent hepatitis A and B, while screening of blood donors, assuring clean needle and syringes, and condom use can prevent blood-borne and sexual transmission.

- Hepatitis B can be prevented by reaching every child with immunization programmes that include hepatitis B vaccine. There is no vaccine for hepatitis C. In addition, infections can be prevented by protecting against mother-to-child transmission of the virus and ensuring the safety of blood, transfusion services, organ donation and injection practice. (Treatment can include antiviral medications if needed.)
- Hepatitis A and E can be prevented by avoiding contaminated food and water; in addition, there is an effective WHO approved vaccine for hepatitis A.
- Hepatitis medicines are now included in the WHO Essential Medicines List, which Member States are encouraged to adopt. Essential medicines are selected based on disease prevalence, safety, efficacy, and comparative cost-effectiveness. The WHO Model List can be used by countries as a guide for the development of their own national list.

The *WHO Global policy report on the prevention and control or viral hepatitis in WHO Member States* and other information related to World Hepatitis Day 2013 can be found at: http://www.who.int/campaigns/hepatitis-day/2013/en/index.html