

**For Immediate Release:      Break the silence on hepatitis C coinfection**

*Refusal to recognize and treat HIV-Hepatitis-C co-infection dampens optimism on Universal Access at ICAAP 9*

**Bali, 12 August 2009:** Activists, drug users, people living with HIV from the Asia Pacific are calling on governments and international organizations to break the silence on HIV and Hepatitis C co-infection (HCV).

Hepatitis-C being (HCV) a blood borne virus is becoming an increasing public health emergency for drug users as it gets transmitted through sharing of not only needles and syringes but also other injecting paraphernalia. In the era of HAART, many People living with HIV and HCV coinfection are dying of HCV related complications rather than of HIV.

Speaking of his own experience in trying to access HCV treatment, Nanao Haobam of the Asia Pacific Network of People living with HIV (APN+) said, "Almost every month my friends are dying and just in the last two months, five of them have lost their battle with Hepatitis-C. Now, my doctor wants me to start on the treatment but it will cost me 1500 USD per month. Where do I get that money?"

According to the WHO, globally 4 - 5 million people living with HIV are co-infected with Hepatitis-C.

Shiba Phurailatpam of APN+ said that "despite increasing cases of HCV co-infections, governments are refusing to recognize the severity of the problem. HCV counseling and testing must be offered free of cost through the HIV treatment programs of all governments."

Currently with no programs and interventions targeting Hepatitis C, the issue is bound to increase manifold. Some of the current regimens for HIV are hard on the liver and need to be changed to alternative drug regimens. The current HIV prevention, Care and support programs can easily incorporate HCV related awareness, counseling, testing and Treatment literacy services without much extra cost.

Dr. Andrijansjah Ariefin from Indonesia said, "HIV and hepatitis C co-infection must be on the agenda of all stakeholders – from the government to donors."

As with ARVs, the high cost of Hepatitis-C medicine (pegylated interferon) is a major barrier in accessing treatment. "As a group working with drug users who are facing the dual challenge of HIV and hepatitis-C, we are opposing the patent on pegylated interferon in India. This is as much a concern for the HIV movement and we hope for their support on this," said Eldred Tellis of Sankalp Rehabilitation Trust in India.

"The World AIDS Campaign is very concerned with the lack of attention to this issue which is threatening to become a crisis for PLHIV co-infected with hepatitis-C. We fully endorse and support all initiatives from the community that will raise the awareness and Access to treatment for Hepatitis C," said Greg Gray, World AIDS Campaign's Key campaign Coordinator.

As we move towards achieving Universal Access, People living with HIV and HCV coinfection seem to be fighting a losing battle and question if Universal Access will be achieved when thousands of PLHIV would have died from HCV related complications.

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