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Unitaid and Hepatitis C in the context of co-infection with HIV

According to the WHO, about 2.3 million people are co-infected with HIV and the hepatitis C virus (HCV). Moreover, there were an estimated 1.75 million new hepatitis C virus (HCV) infections worldwide in 2015. HCV usually presents only mild symptoms, if any, until it is at an advanced stage, thereby making it difficult to recognize the disease early.

When Unitaid started to work on hepatitis C, multiple challenges were apparent:

- Available screening and diagnostic tools were expensive and sub-optimal;
- The “old” treatments had significant side effects and limited efficacy;
- New, safer and better-tolerated medicines such as sofosbuvir and daclatasvir that can cure the disease within 12 weeks were starting to become available, but they were far too costly for most people or their governments;
- A lack of awareness about hepatitis C has led to low demand for both diagnosis and treatment.

Unitaid’s role in the fight against HCV

Demand generation

Unitaid is partnering with Coalition Plus around HCV treatment advocacy. The US \$5.2 million grant seeks to stimulate demand for HCV care in selected countries by raising awareness through engaging and joining forces with local civil society organizations and local decision makers.

Diagnostics

On the diagnostics front, Unitaid is partnering with the Foundation for Innovative Diagnostics (FIND) through a US \$38 million grant to support the development of better, simpler, point-of-care diagnostic tools for HCV as well as introduce hepatitis C testing and treatment into HIV programmes in seven countries.

Treatment

To improve access to treatment in low- and middle-income countries, Unitaid is supporting MSF with a US \$14 million grant to pioneer HCV treatment in HIV-positive people in low- and middle-income countries, and to develop and test simplified, adapted and affordable care models for HCV. Successful models will be documented and proposed for adoption in other countries.

Unitaid furthermore supports the Medicines Patent Pool to negotiate voluntary licenses for HCV medicines; by enabling production and supply of generic medicines, voluntary licenses can help reduce prices.

HCV is a virus that mainly affects the liver. It persists in the liver in about 80 percent of cases, and over many years it can lead to liver disease (cirrhosis) or liver cancer.

The virus is spread mainly by blood-to-blood contact associated with unsafe injection practices, unsafe health care, and the transfusion of unscreened blood and blood products.

There is no vaccine available. However, research is ongoing in this area.