

Why a Belgian hepatitis C day ? (1)

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Hepatitis C is a major health care problem affecting 3% of the world population and 100,000 people in Belgium. This prevalence is 10 times higher than that of HIV (1,2) and recent data from France (3) reveal that, actually, patients with hepatitis C have a 2.5 higher risk of death due to their disease than those suffering from AIDS. If no action plan is organized on a national basis by the various actors of health care, we will have to face, given the present trends, a dramatic increase of the burden of hepatitis C in the next 15 years, due to the complications of cirrhosis and hepatocarcinoma, leading to significant morbidity and mortality and increase of the indications for liver transplantation. This will of course be accompanied by an increase of the health costs whereas organized and planned strategies focused on prevention, screening of high risk groups, optimal and early management of patients who can benefit the most of the antiviral treatment (which can now cure the disease in 50 to 60% of the cases) have been demonstrated to be cost-effective (4).

The aim of this workshop organized on November 26th, 2001, was to inform and sensitize the public and the Belgian and European political authorities on the medico-social and economical aspects of hepatitis C epidemic which began in the 1940s, peaked in the 1980s and is still now responsible for numerous new cases,

particularly in the intravenous drug abuse patient population. Hepatitis C must thus be a public health priority.

The health professionals and the patient's association in Belgium are waiting for strong signals from national and regional political authorities.

In the name of my colleagues of the steering committee (R. Brenard, P. Michielsen, R. Snacken) I thank the invited speakers (who have all submitted their paper for publication in *Acta Gastroenterologica Belgica*), the audience, the patients' association and EuroLiver Foundation, the pharmaceutical industry (Schering-Plough, Roche, Innogenetics) and the Federal Ministry for their support, Colonel Dr Mullier and his team who were our hosts, N. Beauprez for the administrative secretariat and L. Taca who organized the press conference.

References

1. OMS, 1999.
2. Center for Disease Control Prevention : www.cdc.gov
3. DEUFIC S. Comparing the public health burden of chronic hepatitis C and HIV infection in France. *Hepatology*, 2001 : abstract A199.
4. WONG J.B., NEVENS F. Cost-effectiveness of peginterferon alfa-2B plus ribavirin compared to interferon alfa-2B plus ribavirin as initial treatment of chronic hepatitis C in Belgium. *Acta Gastroenterol. Bel.*, 2002, **65** : 114-115.

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(1) The slides presented during the Belgian Hepatitis C day as well as the abstract and the white book are available on the EuroLiver web site : www.hepatitis.org.