

HCV day : conclusions and requests of the Belgian Association for the study of the liver

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on behalf of the Steering Committee of the Belgian Association for the Study of the Liver (BASL).

The first Belgian HCV Day, held in Brussels on November 26, 2001, was as a success. About 200 participants were present and information related to hepatitis C, requests of the BASL and requests of the patients' associations published in the white book were largely diffused by the medical and general press.

The main regret is the low rate of participation of general practitioners and the total absence of politicians at this meeting.

BASL requests

Following requests were presented to the Authorities :

1. A **working party** has to be created to improve the information on hepatitis C and the patients' care. This party would be made up of hepatologists, representatives of concerned ministries (Social Affairs and Public Health), general practitioners and patients' associations. It would co-ordinate following actions :
 - to start **epidemiological studies** to assess HCV problems in Belgium
 - to create **clinical and basic research grants** which could be, as already decided in France, linked to the grants related to HIV-research
 - to promote **information campaigns and continuous formation of general practitioners**
 - to **inform people** through messages in the newspapers, in the radio and TV, through a website, a newsletter, ...
 - to organise **free screening** for the high risk-groups.
2. **Hepatitis C disease must be notified** to allow the initiation of a Belgian registry, managed for example by the Institute of Public Health.
3. It is well known that **acute hepatitis C** has to be treated as soon as possible to hope the cure of the disease and to avoid a chronic course. Reimbursement for treatment of acute hepatitis C is mandatory.
4. Because of the risk of transmission of hepatitis C and other agents by endoscopy, it is now mandatory to use materials for single use and/or washing devices for endoscopic material. The **extra costs for these materials and methods** should be compensated.
5. Patients suffering from chronic hepatitis C have a higher risk of severe hepatitis when they contract

hepatitis A or B. **Vaccination against hepatitis A and B viruses** should be reimbursed in patients with chronic hepatitis C, as recommended by the World Health Organisation, the National Institutes of Health and the Advisory Committee on Immunisation Practices of the Centers of Disease Control in United States.

6. **Patients' associations** are very important in distribution of information to the public. However, they barely have resources. It is obvious that they should receive more support.

Financial resources should be made available to realise these requests, allowing optimal management of the patients suffering from hepatitis C.

Further initiatives

In March 2002 the above mentioned requests were presented personally to the Minister of Public Health, in the presence of members of the Belgian Federal Parliament, during a meeting organised by the patients' associations.

Furthermore, a round table discussion was organised by the BASL Steering Committee, where physicians interested in hepatitis C were invited. Projects will be elaborated in collaboration with general practitioners and patients' associations.

Finally, a interministerial conference of ministries involved with the management of Hepatitis C will be organised in June 2002.

Conclusions

The first Belgian HCV Day was initiated by Prof. Michael Adler and organised in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Health and the BASL. It was one of the first major meetings in Belgium focussing on the problem of hepatitis C. The meeting seems to have increased the awareness of physicians and probably some politicians, in order to proceed towards better care of patients with this important and largely underestimated disease. Other initiatives, in which the medical community and the BASL have an important role to play, will be planned and announced in the future.