



The hidden epidemic of hepatitis C

First Malaysian AIDS Council report on the hepatitis C virus (HCV) epidemic cautions the public health implications of HIV-HCV co-infections.

KUALA LUMPUR, 27 July 2017 – The hepatitis C virus (HCV), a common HIV co-infection among people who inject drugs, poses an emerging public health threat if not immediately addressed, the Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC) warned.

At the launch of the report *At the Edge of a Miracle: The Hepatitis C Epidemic in Malaysia*, it highlighted that the HCV situation in Malaysia remains largely hidden – with a vast majority of cases going undiagnosed – due to lack of knowledge, limited access to diagnostic tools and high treatment costs, among other things.

“The figures released by the Ministry of Health Malaysia are alarming,” said Hisham Hussein, Honorary Secretary of the MAC.

“In 2016 alone, there were 3,393 notified HCV infections. Estimates show that over the years, Malaysia has accumulated somewhere between 435,000 and 500,000 HCV cases, accounting for 2.5 per cent of the general population.”

The HCV prevalence among people who inject drugs is even higher, estimated at 50 to 67 per cent.

“Given the overlapping modes of transmission, HIV-HCV co-infection – particularly among people who inject drugs – is a significant public health concern, in addition to missed opportunities for earlier diagnosis due to the asymptomatic nature of HCV infections,” he added.

He further noted that efforts to address the HIV-HCV treatment cascade, testing among most at-risk populations, as well as the cost effectiveness of testing and treatment need to be accelerated in response to the rate at which the epidemic is growing.

“However, learning from our experiences in the AIDS response, especially in the field of harm reduction this past decade, we are optimistic going forward, thanks to the strengthened partnership with the Ministry of Health Malaysia.

“Through the expansion of community-based HIV testing initiatives under the National Strategic Plan for Ending AIDS 2016 – 2030, we look to create

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greater demand for and establish linkages to HCV testing,” he added while acknowledging the constraints around access to HCV treatment.

The average cost for 24 weeks of treatment for genotype 3 HCV – most common among Malaysians – is RM 17,000.

“We will continue to look to the Ministry of Health Malaysia for leadership on negotiations with international agencies to create a new formula that can reduce the prices of HCV treatment,” he explained.

“We will also capitalise on the gains that we have made in the AIDS response as the impetus to drive efforts towards cross-disciplinary partnerships and creating opportunities for integrated HIV-HCV continuum of care.”

The dearth of consolidated information on HCV in Malaysia – epidemiological data, patients’ anecdotes, as well as analysis on diagnostics and treatment environments – prompted the MAC to publish the report.

It was launched in conjunction with World Hepatitis Day (observed globally on July 28 every year).

“This report seeks to close this gap and serve as a reference for clinicians, civil society, policymakers and other stakeholders working towards access and affordability of HCV diagnostics and medication,” Hisham concluded.

At the Edge of a Miracle: The Hepatitis C Epidemic in Malaysia is available for download [here](#).

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Malaysian AIDS Council

The Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC) was established in 1992 to serve as an umbrella organisation to support and coordinate the efforts of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on HIV and AIDS issues in Malaysia. MAC works in close partnership with government agencies, the private sector and international organisations, to ensure a committed and effective NGO-led response to the HIV epidemic. In addition to providing nationwide coverage of HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services, MAC and its Partner Organisations serve as the common voice for communities most affected by HIV and AIDS in the country. Learn more at www.mac.org.my.

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