

Seminar Report

Hepatitis Seminar – Recommendations for Legislation Against Reuse of Syringes

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Editor

Pakistan has registered an alarming rise in hepatitis, with 12 million people suffering from hepatitis B and C, mainly, due to spread of the infection in hospitals and usage of unsafe injections, by quacks and qualified doctors alike.

“The World Health Organization (WHO) figured out the highest injection-patient ratio in Pakistan worldwide with approximately administration of two billion injections to the patients per year, out of which 80 per cent are unsafe and 90 per cent unnecessary,” said Prof Dr Aftab Mohsin, National Programme Manager, Prime Minister’s Programme for Prevention and Control of Hepatitis, while speaking at a seminar on “Unnecessary use of syringes can cause Hepatitis B & C” jointly organised by Mir Khalil-ur-Rahman Memorial Society and National Programme for Prevention and Control of Hepatitis here at a local hotel on 21st December, 2010.

In Pakistan, he said, approximately one billion injections are administered to patients annually, and that is why the second phase of the program (2010-2015) under the theme of “Injection Safety” would focus on the safe use of injections to prevent hepatitis in the country. Prof Aftab Mohsin pointed out that it was a matter of great concern that almost 10 per cent of the total population (180 million) of Pakistan, including up to seven per cent incidence of hepatitis C and three per cent incidence of hepatitis B patients, was suffering from chronic liver disease, which is termed as the leading cause of hospital admission and death on the medical floor of all tertiary care hospitals in the country.

He informed that unsafe, improper and unnecessary injections usage and use of contaminated instruments by health care workers, qualified or quacks, is the leading cause of HCV transmission. He also emphasized the need to strengthen Central Sterilization and Distribution Departments (CSDs) in hospitals to ensure proper sterilization of surgical instruments to prevent the spread of hepatitis C among patients. He showed video footage of a single syringe being used on four different patients, saying that used syringes caused hepatitis C in 80 per cent of such patients and hepatitis B in 60 per cent of patients.

On an average, each individual receives 10 to 12 injections in a year and 9 out of these 10 injections are unnecessary. Prof Aftab Mohsin said that the federal

government had allocated an amount of Rs 13.9 billion for implementation of the second phase of five-year program for prevention and control of hepatitis. He said that under the programme, measures for prevention of hepatitis drew major attention in the implementation of the second phase of the programme in the next five years. In the first phase of the programme (2005-2010), the main focus was on the treatment of the hepatitis B & C, which failed to achieve the desired objective to reduce the incidence of hepatitis by half in the country. He said that prevention was going to include vaccination for HBV of school going children as well as women of childbearing age. The programme plans to mobilise the support for legislative change for making use of auto disable syringes mandatory. “The poor and deserving patients will get diagnostic, treatment and counseling services free of charge,” he added. Parliamentary Secretary Health, Punjab, Dr Saeed Elahi, said that the Punjab government had given top priority to education and health sectors, which was evident from the fact that Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif had enhanced the health sector’s annual budget from Rs9 billion to Rs48 billion. He said that the government had acquired 12 mobile hospitals for provision of health services in Southern Punjab. He remarked that all kinds of health facilities are being provided to the patients at THQ and DHQ hospitals at tehsil and district level in the province. “Focal persons have been appointed at district level to ensure provision of healthcare services to patients,” he added. Prof Dr Saeed Khokhar said that hepatitis B & C were regarded as silent killers because, once contracted, the disease could remain dormant for up to 20 years, adding that there were no apparent signs of the disease if even a 7th part of the patient’s liver was functioning.

He said that hepatitis spreads through unsafe transfusion of blood, ear/nose piercing, dental treatment from roadside quacks, use of unnecessary injections, intravenous instruments and drips by the general practitioners, who usually don’t have any mechanism for sterilization of instruments. He also alleged that general practitioners also bought used drips, intravenous instruments and syringes, after recycling in the market. He said that standard practices are not being adopted in blood transfusion, especially in the private sector, and the health department’s instructions are being violated.

Lastly Prof Dr Saleem Akhtar urged the government to make legislation to prevent usage of used syringes, because presently no law prohibits use of used syringes in the country. "There is a major role of physician and hospital in the spread of hepatitis," he said, adding that the patients should always insist on quality syringes. Prof Dr Muhammad Amjad also said that presently there was no law to award punishment to a doctor or quack for applying used syringes on patients.

Prof Dr Riaz Tasneem said that hepatitis had risen alarmingly in the last 20 years and added that usage of used syringes was more prevalent in rural areas of the country.

Prof Dr Yaqoob Qazi said that the health and education sectors were most affected in Pakistan because only 0.8 per cent of the GDP was being spent on health, while India and Bangladesh were spending 4 to 5 per cent of the GDP on health sector. In Pakistan, he said that 90 per cent of the budget was spent on treatment and remaining 10 per cent was spent on prevention in the country. "Only Rs 2 million is spent on research," he added. Lt Gen (retd) Amjad Shoaib stressed on the need to adopt preventive measures to avoid the diseases, while adding that early diagnosis and treatment of hepatitis B & C were crucial. Besides, a patient having had a liver transplant also spoke on the occasion.