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ASIA EDITION

Singapore launches first Hepatitis C elimination initiatives through a public-private partnership

July 27, 2022 | News | By Hithaishi C Bhaskar

On account of World Hepatitis Day 2022, HCSA Community Services aims to provide HCV testing, education, and linkage to care services for high-risk patient groups in association with Gilead Sciences, and Tan Tock Seng Hospital



In alignment with the World Health Organization (WHO)'s call to eliminate hepatitis C (HCV) by 2030, Singapore's HCSA Community Services(HCSA), a charitable organisation announced the launch of a targeted HCV elimination programme, a day ahead of World Hepatitis Day 2022.

Founded by HCSA and coordinated by HCSA Highpoint Halfway House, a residential shelterforex-offenders, the HCSA Highpoint Hepatitis C –Educate, Test, Treat! (ETT) Programme, together with the End-C Programme founded by Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), aims to provide HCV testing, education, and linkage to care services for high-risk patient groups such as former drug offenders, newly released prisoners, and those in recovery from addiction. The ETT programme is a grant project supported by Gilead Sciences.

In conjunction with the programme TTSH is currently running a study with HCSA participants to validate the reliability and convenience of a minimally invasive point-of-care test (POCT). The POCT would provide a possibility of the more convenient and accessible method using a finger-prick blood sample and saliva test. The concept of the POCT is focused on reducing the barriers to testing as it could encourage the person to test frequently and get quick results in 20 to 40 minutes. A positive result will then allow the person to seek confirmatory tests and receive the earlier intervention. Confirmed active HCV participants of the ETT programme will also be given oral medication for treatment.

The findings of the ETTprogrammewill be further implemented in the End-C Programme, which aims to gradually treat and screen other at-risk groups. One of its main goals is to ultimately encourage self-assessment of HCV risks amongst the public. The combined efforts of HCSA and TTSH to combat HCV include a newly launched HepatitisC clinic in TTSH and the setup of a digital resource platform that grants access to education materials and a friend-CBefrienders' Toolkit to encourage positive HCV patients to complete their treatment journey. The ETT and End-C Programmes, which are running concurrently, will also

focus on providing seamless access to treatment for HCV-infected patients. Both the ETT Programme and TTSH study will be conducted over a period of twelve months. Please refer to Annex A for more information.

Dr. Yew Kuo Chao, Senior Consultant, Gastroenterology and Clinical Hepatology, Tan Tock Seng Hospital says, “We hope to drive the elimination of HCV by providing linkage to care for patients and introducing minimally invasive testing and simplified treatment methods. If successful, we hope to expand this service to the wider population and benefit more people in the process.”

“The World Health Organization has set a global target to eliminate viral hepatitis as a public health threat by 2030. Through the Liver Index Study, we have identified critical knowledge gaps and attitudes of the general local public towards liver health. Gilead Sciences is working with community partners to support high-impact initiatives which address existing barriers and challenges to HCV elimination efforts,” says Stanley Li, General Manager, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia, GileadSciences.

“Microelimination projects like the HCSA Highpoint Hepatitis C –Educate, Test, Treat! (ETT) Programme, with its focus on high-risk groups for which treatment and prevention interventions can be delivered more efficiently, is a starting point that we believe will translate into a more positive impact for local communities” he adds.

As part of the combined programme, patients will also be given educational materials and telephone consultations by the Tan Tock Seng Hospital Gastroenterology and Hepatology Department,to assist them in their treatment journey. This is complemented byHCSA’sFriEnd-CBefrienderProgramme, an integrated support system to guide patients that are HCV positive and ensure that they do not fall out of the programme and complete the treatment journey.

To sustain and drive further education among target patient groups, HCSA will also be conducting educational campaigns through a range of initiatives, including talks at HCSA HighpointHalfway Houseand other halfway houses in Singapore.

“As the first halfway house in Singapore to champion and host this first-of-its-kind HCV elimination programme, we are committed to driving awareness and education on HCV among vulnerable groups,” said Kim Lang Khalil, Chief Executive Officer, HCSACommunity Services. “We are confident that the ETT and End-C Programmes will empower at-risk groups, remove existing barriers to HCV care, and enable all individuals to live their lives to the fullest.”

By Hithaishi Bhaskar