Preventing Cancer Before It Strikes

February 1, 2017 By Raquel Peck

Liver cancer is one of the most common types of cancer worldwide, resulting in 800,000 lives lost each year. It comes in two forms: primary liver cancer, where it begins in the liver, and secondary, where it spreads from other organs.

Primary liver cancer, the most prevalent liver cancer worldwide, can be attributed to heavy drinking and other unhealthy lifestyle choices, but is most commonly caused by having a long-term infection with hepatitis B virus (HBV) or hepatitis C virus (HCV), which in turn accounts for the biggest cause of the 642,500 liver cancer related deaths per year, globally.

What many people don't realize is that the 80 percent of deaths caused by viral hepatitis can be completely avoided because of the availability of preventive vaccines for hep B and a curative treatment for hep C.

If the majority of these deaths are entirely preventable, why does liver cancer continue to claim the lives of so many? The answer is simple — 95 percent of people living with viral hepatitis are unaware of their status, and of those who do know their status less than 1 percent have access to life-saving medical interventions.

Last year, at the 69th World Health Assembly, 194 countries adopted the first-ever World Health Organization (WHO) Global Health Sector Strategy for viral hepatitis, which presents a clear commitment to eliminate HBV and HCV by 2030. Combatting these cancer-causing viruses by 2030 is also a target of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. If these commitments are upheld by governments, we can majorly reduce the number of cancer deaths globally.

We, as civil society, seek to hold authorities accountable to their promises. With our membership of over 240 organizations in 82 countries, World Hepatitis Alliance is working to ensure that these targets are reached.

Here's how we all can make a difference:

1. Advocating for equal access to vaccines and treatment is something that we can all do, and something that will greatly reduce the number of liver cancer cases. We need to ensure that all children receive preventive vaccinations against hep B at birth, and that everyone has access to life-saving treatment for hep C, no matter their circumstances.
2. Raising awareness and encouraging routine testing as symptoms do not always manifest themselves in someone who has viral hepatitis. Without timely diagnosis and treatment, viral

hepatitis can progress into cirrhosis and liver cancer.

3. Breaking down the stigma surrounding hepatitis, as well as the fear of getting tested, is crucial to improving the rates and speed of diagnosis.
4. Safe medical practices are key! It may shock you to hear that there are still 39 countries in the world that do not routinely screen blood donations for viral hepatitis. By 2030, we need to ensure that no one contracts HBV or HCV at the hands of medical professionals. It is also crucial that we detect viral hepatitis in pregnant women so we can take steps to prevent mother-to-child transmission.

World Cancer Day on Saturday, February 4, is a perfect opportunity to unite people around the world to fight against cancer together, under the theme #WeCanICan. This year, we have a very real opportunity to make a difference on a global scale. The elimination of viral hepatitis is a reality, and it's happening now. Together, we have the power to fight for prevention, as well a cure: #WeCanICan stop liver cancer BEFORE it strikes, BEFORE it disempowers, and BEFORE it kills.

For more information on viral hepatitis, please visit the World Hepatitis Alliance website.

Read the WHO Global Health Sector Strategy for viral hepatitis here.

Raquel Peck is the CEO of World Hepatitis Alliance.

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