

## **Against all the odds - A private initiative to eliminate viral hepatitis:**

### **The Swiss Hepatitis Strategy as a model to face inactivity by health authorities**

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#### **Background/Aim**

The global burden of viral hepatitis is significant, despite the availability of highly effective prevention and treatment measures. Viral hepatitis kills more people worldwide than HIV. In contrast to HIV, decision makers in the field of health policies are reacting only slowly to this situation. In consequence the goal of the first global hepatitis strategy by WHO, elimination of viral hepatitis as a public health threat, is not yet realistic. It appears that the evidence based medical knowhow to combat a major public health threat alone is not enough to evoke a political momentum to act.

Driven by the increasing evidence for the public health burden of viral hepatitis and the passivity of the health authorities, the Swiss Hepatitis Strategy (SHS) with the vision of eliminating viral hepatitis until 2030 was launched by representatives of the civil society.

#### **Methods**

The strategy applied the method of the Governmental Learning Spiral, an approach designed to overcome political barriers and to enhance innovation and learning in the political context. This participative process, where the ones who develop are also the ones who implement, enhances a sense of social belonging among the involved actors, which leads to the alignment of different viewpoints as well as the creation of social networks. In consequence, a broader audience gets involved, what in turn evokes feedback loops that lead to the continuous improvement of the strategy process. It is expected that the involved actors contribute their expertise as unpaid volunteers. Their return of investment are new first hand insights from the other participants as well as the opportunity to influence the process as a whole.

#### **Results**

The SHS process was launched in 2014 with a network of 70 personalities, representing all selected perspectives. Overtime the structure of the SHS evolved to adapt best to the always-changing process requirements. There was an overall drift from the original informal towards a formal structure. Today the organization called “Swiss Hepatitis” provides the legal

framework and the organizational structure to SHS. A managing director could be employed at the beginning of this year.

One of the key results and warranties for the success of the SHS was the commitment of the working groups and the network members. Their readiness to work for the common cause for free over a time period of almost five years is extraordinary. More than 3500 hours of voluntary work have been provided by the network members so far. This allowed the SHS with a yearly budget of less than 200'000 US \$ to work highly cost-effective.

After almost five years of operation the SHS delivered numerous tangible outcomes on the different levels of action:

- With the ongoing campaigns of the SHS viral hepatitis achieved progressively more media coverage and growing attention in the general population. Whereas up to 2014 viral hepatitis has rarely been a topic in the leading media in Switzerland all of a sudden more than 150 articles and broadcasts covered the topic since then.
- The implementation of universal access along with significant medication price reductions to/of HCV therapies has been enforced by round table discussions with health authorities, supporting patients affected by restrictions to access generic medication from India and continuous political and media work from the SHS network.
- An impressive learning curve on the topic of viral hepatitis among health authorities could be observed over the past five years. The national health authorities mandated an epidemiological situation analysis in 2016 which serves as important baseline for measuring the success of the SHS.
- Another important achievement of the initiative was the foundation of a new national patient organization, the Swiss Hepatitis C Association (SHCA), building the first national advocacy group in the field of viral hepatitis and providing peer-to-peer counselling.

## **Conclusions**

The case of the SHS proves, that passivity of health authorities in fighting viral hepatitis can be efficiently overcome by civil society. The application of a carefully designed political learning process is an innovative tool to face today's health policy challenges such as the hepatitis epidemic. It allowed the SHS to become a catalyst that helped to accelerate and guide a much-needed development in the field of testing, treating and curing viral hepatitis. Although just five years into practice, there is much hope that the vision to eliminate hepatitis in Switzerland till 2030 will be achieved.