

Health groups ask govt to issue compulsory licenses to make HCV drugs affordable

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A group of health activists in the country demanded to the government to either reject the patents given to Hepatitis drugs or to issue compulsory licensing to make these drugs accessible to the common people as Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is emerging as a growing public health threat in India. Presently, the HCV treatment is unavailable in the public healthcare system and unaffordable in the private sector in the country due to the patent.

Lambasting the Union health ministry's silence on the issue, the International Treatment Preparedness Coalition – India (ITPC-India) and other health groups also asked for the integration of HIV and HCV drugs as both the HIV and hepatitis viruses are transmitted in similar ways and it makes public health sense to link HCV prevention efforts to HIV programme.

According to the health groups, there are two main obstacles to an effective HCV response in the country. First is the absence of prevention efforts; second is the lack of will among the policy makers in the health ministry to treat HCV. Currently, HCV treatment is a combination of two drugs, pegylated interferon and ribavirin. For people who do not clear the virus spontaneously from their body and go on to develop chronic forms of the disease that affects the liver, treatment is currently unavailable in the public healthcare system and unaffordable in the private sector.

The high cost of HCV treatment in India is attributed to the absence of generic competition due to patent barriers as they block the development of more affordable generic versions of the drug. As a result, the companies charge exorbitant prices from patients, ranging from Rs. 14,000 to 18,000 per dose.

According to the groups, the government has been moving far too slowly on addressing the problems of patients who need HCV treatment. “When drugs are patented, and pharmaceutical companies fail to fulfil their obligation to make patented medicines available and affordable to patients, the only way to bring prices down is through examining the validity of the patent granted or compulsory licensing which allows generic production of more affordable versions,” said Loon Gangte of the Delhi Network of Positive People (DNP+). “Instead of addressing the problem, it's like the government is pretending the death and the sickness that HCV causes are not happening.”

“People living with HIV are increasingly being diagnosed with HCV co-infection. Hepatitis C, is the “silent killer,” threatening to undermine HIV treatment efforts”, said Loon Gangte. “We need not only AIDS medicines but also access to HCV medicines from the government.”