GLASGOW ¦ 2 September 2015 - Participants at the first-ever World Hepatitis Summit will urge countries to develop national programmes that can ultimately eliminate viral hepatitis as a problem of public health concern.

"We know how to prevent viral hepatitis, we have a safe and effective vaccine for hepatitis B, and we now have medicines that can cure people with hepatitis C and control hepatitis B infection," said Dr Gottfried Hirnschall, Director of the WHO's Global Hepatitis Programme. "Yet access to diagnosis and treatment is still lacking or inaccessible in many parts of the world. This summit is a wake-up call to build momentum to prevent, diagnose, treat - and eventually eliminate viral hepatitis as a public health problem."

Around 400 million people are currently living with viral hepatitis, and the disease claims an estimated 1.45 million lives each year, making it one of the world's leading causes of death. Hepatitis B and C together cause approximately 80% of all liver cancer deaths, yet most people living with chronic viral hepatitis are unaware of their infection.

The summit, co-sponsored by WHO and the World Hepatitis Alliance, and hosted in Glasgow by the Scottish Government this week, is the first high-level global meeting to focus specifically on hepatitis, attracting delegates from more than 60 countries. The aim is to help countries enhance action to prevent viral hepatitis infection and ensure that people who are infected are diagnosed and offered treatment.

Policymakers, patient groups, physicians and other key stakeholders attending the summit aim to issue a declaration underlining their belief that the elimination of viral hepatitis is possible and urging governments to work with WHO to define and agree on global targets for prevention, diagnosis and treatment.

WHO is launching a new manual for the development and assessment of national viral hepatitis plans at the summit. Policymakers and other key stakeholders at the 3-day meeting (2-4 September) are also discussing the draft WHO Global Health Sector Strategy on Viral Hepatitis, which sets targets for 2030. The targets include a 90% reduction in new cases of chronic hepatitis B and C, a 65% reduction in hepatitis B and C deaths, and treatment of 80% of eligible people with chronic hepatitis B and C infections.

The World Summit, which is intended to become an annual event, aims to focus attention on a public health approach to viral hepatitis and to be a central forum for countries to share their experience and best practices to drive rapid advances in national responses.

"This summit is about empowering countries to take the practical steps needed at a national level. It has brought here to Scotland patients' groups and civil society from across the world to support countries in doing this. We can eliminate viral hepatitis as a major global killer but we must all work together to make that vision a reality," said Charles Gore, President of the World

Hepatitis Alliance.

Putting in place a well-funded and comprehensive response is a challenge for many governments who have a high burden of hepatitis-related diseases. In sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia between 5-10% of the population is chronically infected with hepatitis B. High rates of chronic infections are also found in the Amazon and the southern parts of eastern and central Europe. Hepatitis C is found worldwide. Infection rates are high in Africa and Central and East Asia, and approximately two-thirds of people who inject drugs are infected with hepatitis C.

An increasing number of countries are taking action to address viral hepatitis. They include Egypt, which has substantially increased the number of people receiving treatment for hepatitis C in recent years; Georgia, which has set a goal for the national elimination of hepatitis C; and Mongolia, which has endorsed a comprehensive strategy for the control of viral hepatitis

For more information: http://www.who.int/hepatitis/en/