

Sulaiman Health Insights



Prioritising Hepatitis B Control in Sierra Leone: A National Call to Action

Position Paper

Introduction

Hepatitis B is a silent epidemic, silently undermining the health and well-being of thousands of Sierra Leoneans. With an alarming prevalence rate of 21.7%, the burden of this viral infection is three times higher than the Sub-Saharan African average of 6.1% (Lakoh et al., 2021; WHO, 2018). Yet, compared to other diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria, which receive significant attention and funding, hepatitis B remains a neglected public health issue.

If left unaddressed, the escalating burden of hepatitis B will have devastating consequences for public health, economic stability, and national development. Sierra Leone must prioritise hepatitis B control as an urgent national health agenda.

The Case for Prioritisation

Hepatitis B prevalence has increased significantly over the past two decades. For example:

- In 2005, Freetown reported a prevalence of 6.2% (Wurie et al., 2005).
- By 2017, Bo District reported a staggering 21.4% prevalence (Zoker et al., 2017).

The economic impact is equally concerning. Treating chronic hepatitis B and its complications, such as cirrhosis and liver cancer, costs between \$3,094 and \$32,958 annually per patient in other countries (Zare et al., 2016). For a nation where over 50% of the population lives below the poverty line (World Bank, 2021), these costs are unsustainable and catastrophic for affected families.

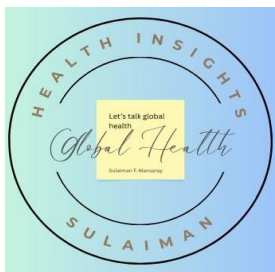
Additionally, while HIV/AIDS receives substantial support with a 1.7% prevalence (Stat-SL and ICF, 2020), hepatitis B, with a far higher prevalence and comparable severity, remains overlooked. Life-saving vaccines, which cost around \$100 per dose, are unaffordable for most Sierra Leoneans (WHO, 2022).

Roadmap to Hepatitis B Elimination

To effectively combat hepatitis B, Sierra Leone needs a robust, multi-faceted response. Below are five key strategies:

1. Develop a National Hepatitis B Policy

A comprehensive policy is crucial to guide prevention, diagnosis, and treatment efforts. This policy must be data-driven and aligned with global best practices.



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2. **Expand Vaccination and Screening Services**

Vaccination coverage remains insufficient due to high costs and limited access. Scaling up affordable vaccines and diagnostic tools at primary health units (PHUs), particularly in rural areas, is essential.

3. **Strengthen Leadership and Coordination**

Effective control requires strong leadership and collaboration among stakeholders. The Ministry of Health, in partnership with the National Public Health Agency (NPHA), should lead a unified strategy supported by district and community-level coordination.

4. **Invest in Healthcare Workforce Development**

Healthcare providers require ongoing training in hepatitis B prevention, diagnosis, and treatment. Integrating hepatitis B control into existing programs like those for HIV/AIDS and malaria can improve resource efficiency.

5. **Foster Public Awareness and Behaviour Change**

Misinformation and vaccine hesitancy hinder progress. Culturally relevant health education campaigns can raise awareness, dispel myths, and promote screening and vaccination.

The Role of Partnerships

Collaboration with international and local partners is vital to combat hepatitis B effectively. Notable efforts, such as Partners in Health establishing Sierra Leone's first hepatitis B treatment hospital, demonstrate the potential of coordinated initiatives (Partners in Health, 2020).

To succeed, Sierra Leone must leverage support from organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, and others, integrating hepatitis B control into broader health system strengthening efforts.

Conclusion: A National Imperative

Hepatitis B is not just a health issue—it is an economic, social, and developmental challenge that demands immediate action. Prioritising hepatitis B control will reduce preventable deaths, alleviate the economic burden on families, and strengthen Sierra Leone's healthcare system.

The Ministry of Health and NPHA must champion this cause, mobilising sustainable funding and political will. Policymakers, international partners, and civil society have a shared responsibility to act decisively. Together, we can turn the tide on hepatitis B and build a healthier Sierra Leone in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Call to Action



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Now is the time to act. By investing in vaccines, diagnostics, healthcare training, and public awareness, Sierra Leone can reverse the tide of this silent epidemic. Stakeholders at all levels must come together to prioritise hepatitis B control and secure a healthier, stronger future for the nation.

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