World Hepatitis Day: Infection increases mouth cancer risk

By DTI

HOUSTON, USA: World Hepatitis Day is one of four official disease-specific World Health Organization (WHO) health days. It aims to raise awareness about viral hepatitis, which can be transmitted through unsafe injection practices and inadequate sterilization in the health care setting. Hepatitis C is associated with liver cirrhosis and other diseases. For example, a new study has shown that individuals infected with the hepatitis C virus are at a greater risk of developing oral cancer.

In the study, researchers at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center investigated medical records of 409 patients with new-onset primary oropharyngeal or nonoropharyngeal head and neck cancers, as well as 694 controls with smoking-associated cancer of the lung, esophagus or urinary bladder, who were all tested for the hepatitis C virus from 2004 through 2014 at the center.

They found that the prevalence of the hepatitis C virus was higher in oropharyngeal cancer patients (14 per cent), particularly human papillomavirus-positive oropharyngeal cancer patients, and nonoropharyngeal head and neck cancer patients (20 per cent) compared with controls (6.5 per cent).

The findings are of great interest for future research, according to Dr Harrys A. Torres, one of the study authors and an associate professor at the center. Given the connection found between the two viruses in this patient population, Torres and his colleagues plan to investigate other HPV-associated cancers and their possible link to hepatitis C.

WHO estimates that about 350–700 million people globally have chronic hepatitis C infection and approximately 700,000 people worldwide die each year from hepatitis C-related liver diseases. The most affected regions are Africa and central and east Asia. The hepatitis C virus is blood-borne and thus mainly spread through blood-to-blood contact. In rare cases, it can be transmitted through certain sexual practices and during childbirth. There is currently no vaccine for hepatitis C.

The WHO introduced World Hepatitis Day in 2010, to be celebrated each year on 28 July. Millions of people across the world now take part to raise awareness about viral hepatitis and to call for improved access to treatment, better prevention programs and government action.

The study, titled "Association between hepatitis C virus and head and neck cancers," was published in the August issue of the Journal of the National Cancer Institute by Oxford University Press.