Finding a Cure and Better Treatments for Liver Cancer:
Focused Liver Cancer Research at NCI is Needed

As the incidence of primary liver cancer in the United States -- with a 5-year survival rate less than 15% -- continues to increase, it is critical that the National Cancer (NCI) Institute of the National Institutes of Health create a targeted liver cancer research initiative. **The Hepatitis B Foundation and its partners recommend that the NCI create a focused research framework for primary liver cancer with dedicated and increased funding to pursue better treatments and interventions for liver cancer with a goal of increasing the 5-year survival rate from this deadly cancer and working towards finding a cure.**

The incidence of primary liver cancer -- with a 5-year survival rate less than 15% -- is a growing concern with an estimated 39,230 new cases and 27,170 deaths in 2016. Primary liver cancer death rates have overall been increasing since 1980; from 2003 to 2012, rates increased by 2.7% per year.

To address the public health threat of liver cancer, creating a Liver Cancer Research Framework similar to the frameworks created for pancreatic and lung cancer pursuant to the Recalcitrant Cancer Research Act of 2012 would be an important step forward. Such a liver cancer research framework should build on the March, 2014 workshop of experts convened by NCI to explore opportunities in liver cancer research with the goal of identifying research questions and recommendations for coordinated research resources and initiatives.

The Liver Cancer Research Framework initiative should focus on identified research opportunities such as finding biomarkers for early detection, studying the molecular pathology and genomics of liver cancer, and addressing areas to improve prevention and treatment. It is now recognized that cancer is a collection of many diseases that no longer fit neatly into organ-specific categories and, therefore, cancer subtypes that may be similar should also be addressed by a liver cancer research framework.

The link between HBV infection and primary liver cancer is well established with up to 60% of global liver cancer cases caused by the hepatitis B virus. In the U.S., liver cancer is the 2nd deadliest cancer with a 5-year survival rate less than 15%. In fact, the CDC's 2016 Annual Report to the Nation on the Status of Cancer found that unlike other cancers, liver cancer incidence and death rates are rising. Due to the link between HBV and liver cancer, a stronger focus on liver cancer at the National Cancer Institute is important. For example, while the NCI's Specialized Programs of Research Excellence (SPOREs) currently exist for every other major cancer, none currently exist for primary liver cancer.

Individuals chronically infected with HBV are 100 times more likely to develop liver cancer than uninfected people because the virus directly and repeatedly attacks the liver, which over time can lead to progressive liver damage and liver cancer. Needless to say this progression of the disease and the fact that 1 in 4 people living with chronic HBV infection will die prematurely from related liver failure and/or liver cancer creates a strong interest for the Hepatitis B Foundation and its partners to advocate for increased awareness and federal funding to address the growing and very deadly threat of liver cancer.