

“I don’t understand why things like that aren’t mandatory”: People in prisons’ views on universal opt-out and point-of-care testing in prison

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Background: Hepatitis C care is well established in Australia’s prisons; in 2022 one-third of all treatments nationally were initiated in prisons. However, to reach elimination goals adaptations to existing programs are necessary to reach more people living with hepatitis C. Structural and social barriers to accessing in-prison hepatitis C testing remain; universal opt-out testing may mitigate some of these barriers.

Methods: Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 participants in one women’s prison (n=9) and two men’s prisons (n=16) in Victoria, Australia between December 2022 to May 2023. Interviews examined participant’s hepatitis C testing and treatment experiences and knowledge, and perceived barriers and enablers to increase prison-based testing. Interview data were analysed thematically.

Results: Participants were aged 25-50 years and four identified as Aboriginal. Most (n=17) were sentenced. Overwhelmingly participants believed universal opt-out hepatitis C testing should be adopted in prisons. Participants believed universal opt-out testing could help avoid stigma because everyone was getting tested, could address poor knowledge about hepatitis C and eliminate arduous barriers to hepatitis C testing in prison—especially for those unaware about hepatitis C. Point-of-care testing at reception to prison was endorsed for being quick and easy, addressing the hassle of making an appointment, and alleviating the anxiety of waiting for pathology and results. Several participants described challenging venous access creating hesitancy for standard blood testing; point-of-care testing was considered one way to avoid this.

Conclusion: Participants in our study were overwhelmingly supportive of adopting prison-based universal opt out testing. Our study demonstrates how providing universal opt out hepatitis C testing in Australian prisons could help address current access barriers hindering hepatitis C elimination.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: This work was supported by a National Health and Medical Research Council Program Grant. RW has received funding from Gilead Sciences for investigator-initiated research unrelated to this work. AJT has received consulting fees from Gilead, Abbvie, Roche Diagnostics, Assembly Biosciences, speaker fees from Gilead Sciences, Roche Diagnostics and

investigator-initiated grants from Gilead Sciences, all unrelated to this work. All other authors have no conflicts to declare.