THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON HCV CASCADE OF CARE IN VULNERABLE POPULATIONS IN SLOVENIA: RESULTS OF A NATIONAL STUDY

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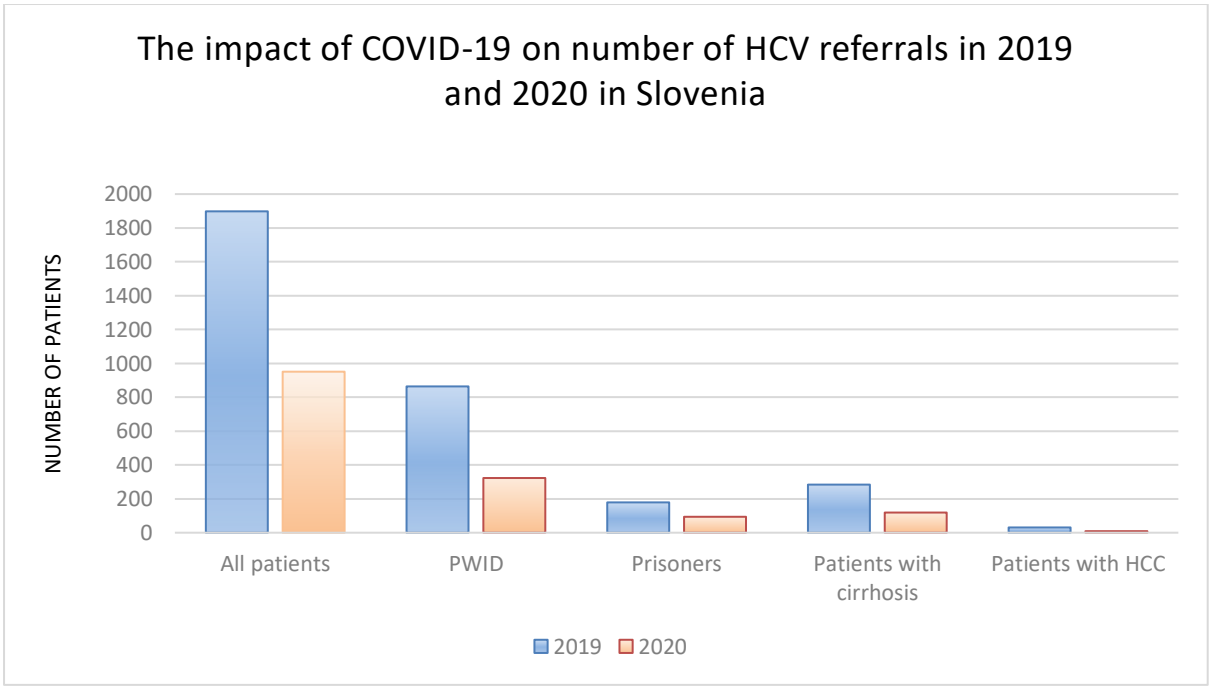
Background:
By January 2020, a two million population of Slovenia was on track to reach hepatitis C virus (HCV) elimination by 2030 if current HCV testing and treatment rates continued. With declaration of COVID-19 epidemic on March 12, 2020 five hospitals managing all HCV-infected patients in Slovenia were transformed to COVID-19 hospitals. We aimed to assess on national level the impact of COVID-19 epidemic on HCV cascade-of-care, especially in people who inject drugs (PWID) and prisoners.

Methods:
Nineteen clinical specialists for HCV management from five hospitals were invited to complete a 28-question survey on annual HCV cascade-of-care given at their hospitals, separately for the years 2019 and 2020. Obtained data was further statistically analysed.

Results:
Compared to 2019, 75% decrease in number of persons attending free anonymous HCV testing was observed in 2020 (1629 vs. 413); besides, we noted 65.5% decrease in number of HCV confirmatory tests performed (2017 vs. 13219), 57.7% decrease in HCV RNA positive results (248 vs. 143), 45% decrease in number of patients with newly diagnosed chronic hepatitis C (110 vs. 61), 91% decrease in number of patients diagnosed with acute HCV infection (11 vs. 1), and 50% decrease in number of HCV-related referrals (1898 vs. 951) (Figure). In 2020, 46% (104/226) of planned introductions of HCV treatment were realised with a significantly lower proportion of PWID compared to non-PWID (39% vs. 69%; p<0,001); besides, 63% decrease in number of referrals by PWID (323 vs, 864; p<0,001) and 47.5% decrease in number of referrals by prisoners (94 vs. 179) was noted compared to 2019.

Conclusion:
The results present a significant negative impact of COVID-19 epidemic on all steps of HCV cascade-of-care in Slovenia, especially in PWID and prisoners. Further studies are needed to evaluate impact of these findings on HCV disease burden in the context of HCV elimination goal.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:
No pharmaceutical grants were received in the development of this study.


The impact of COVID-19 on number of HCV referrals in 2019 and 2020 in Slovenia
NUMBER OF PATIENTS
2000
1800
1600
1400
1200
1000
800
600
400
200
0
All patients
PWID
Prisoners
Patients with cirrhosis
Patients with HCC
2019
2020