

High intensity hepatitis C point-of-care testing in a large Victorian prison: making progress towards elimination

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Background: HCV testing and treatment is well-established in Victorian prisons. Novel initiatives such as point-of-care testing programs and high-intensity testing campaigns have potential to increase rates of HCV testing, diagnosis and treatment uptake to reach elimination goals. This study evaluated the prevalence of HCV infection and treatment uptake among people with current HCV infection following a high-intensity testing campaign at a reception prison in Victoria, Australia.

Methods: This was an observational study of a nurse-led high-intensity point-of-care testing campaign by the St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne Statewide Prison Hepatitis Program over 9 days at a men's reception prison in Victoria, Australia. Demographics, injecting history, and previous HCV diagnosis were collected. Point-of-care testing was performed by HCV antibody (INSTI) or, if previously diagnosed, HCV RNA (Xpert HCV Viral Load Fingerstick test). Prisoners with current HCV were prescribed DAA treatment.

Results: 583 of 779 men (median age, 35 years, 19% identified as Indigenous) were tested (75% of prison population). Overall, 42% (n=244) reported a history of injecting drug use, 20% (n=116) had a previous HCV diagnosis, with 85% (n=98) having previously received treatment. HCV antibody prevalence was 21% (n=121) and HCV RNA prevalence was 1.5% (n=9). Among people with a history of injecting drug use, HCV antibody prevalence was 43% (104/244) and HCV RNA prevalence was 3.3% (8/244). 100% (n=9) of men with current HCV were commenced on treatment within 2-weeks of diagnosis.

Conclusion: A high-intensity testing campaign was effective in achieving high uptake of HCV testing and treatment in a reception prison in Victoria. A low proportion of people with current infection (1.5%) along with moderate HCV antibody prevalence (21%) suggests considerable progress towards elimination of HCV among people in prisons in Victoria. Further work is needed to understand whether the low prevalence of current HCV infection is observed across other prison settings in Victoria.

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