THREE WAYS TO TEST: CREATING FLEXIBILITY IN A PEER OUTREACH HEPATITIS C (HCV) POINT-OF-CARE TESTING PROGRAM IN VICTORIA, BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Background: For Canada to achieve the World Health Organization's (WHO) 2030 hepatitis C virus (HCV) elimination goal, sustained high treatment initiation rates are required, especially among people who use drugs (PWUD), who account for most new HCV infections in British Columbia. People with lived experience of HCV treatment and substance use (peers) are essential for HCV elimination efforts, as they build trust, dispel myths about treatment and side effects, and can support decentralized point-of-care (POC) testing in community, ultimately increasing timely diagnosis and treatment uptake among PWUD.

Description of model of care: Building on our nurse-led HCV program, peers have been trained to provide HCV POC antibody tests and dried blood spot (DBS) RNA tests alongside research staff and the HCV nurse during two-hour outreach testing events at housing facilities, shelters, or the street, earning $30 per hour. Clients receive a $10 incentive for HCV POC antibody testing and either DBS or phlebotomy done by the HCV nurse if previously exposed to HCV. For unhoused clients facing multiple barriers to medication access and pharmacy engagement, peer support has evolved to provide daily outreach for HCV treatment delivery across the city.

Effectiveness: Since 2022, 115 peer HCV POC outreach events have tested 2283 people (1701 unique): 1752 POC HCV antibody, 507 phlebotomy, and 103 DBS tests. Of those tested, 71 people were RNA positive, 57 initiated HCV treatment, 5 discontinued, 1 failed treatment (retreated), 1 died prior to SVR, 4 are awaiting SVR testing, and 47 have confirmed SVR.

Conclusion and next steps: This flexible approach to HCV testing for PWUD has successfully employed a peer-based outreach model to identify and treat those who experience barriers to accessing health care. Insights and unique perspectives from peers continue to inform the program, supporting the expansion of HCV testing to included peer-delivered treatment.

Disclosure of Interest: AbbVie, Gilead, Telus and ViiV.

Keywords: Hepatitis C, mobile outreach, point-of-care, diagnostics and testing, community engagement, lived and living experience