

HIV, STI, and Hepatitis Among People Who Inject Drugs at a Sexual Health Clinic in Melbourne, Australia: 2012 to 2022

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Background: People who inject drugs (PWID) face intersecting risks of HIV, viral hepatitis, and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), yet their sexual health needs remain under-prioritised in many public health responses. As we move towards ambitious targets for HIV elimination, a sharp focus on key populations such as PWID is essential to avoid widening health disparities. This study aimed to investigate trends in sexual practices and STI positivity among PWID attending a major urban sexual health service over a 10-year period (2012–2022).

Methods: A repeated cross-sectional study analysing data collected at a sexual health centre 2012-2022. New clients were eligible if aged 18 and older, sexually active, and had injected drugs in the last 12 months. Clients were categorised as men who have sex with women only (MSWO), gay or bisexual men who have sex with men (gbMSM), or women. We calculated the two-yearly positivity of HIV, STIs, HBV and HCV.

Results: A total of 1,229 clients(395 MSWO, 457 gbMSM, and 377 women) were included in the study. There was a significant rise in syphilis($p_{trend} = 0.0033$); however, no significant changes were observed for other infections. The two-yearly positivity for syphilis increased significantly from 0.6% (1/156) in 2012/13 to 10.0%(13/130) in 2020/21 $p_{trend}=0.0033$. gbMSM had a higher positivity for any infection(29.1%,133/457) than MSWO(19.8%, 78/395) and women (17.0%,64/377) ($p <0.001$). The positivity of new HIV was 2.6%(95%CI:1.6-3.8; 22/861), infectious syphilis was 6.8%(95% CI: 5.2-8.7; 59/866), gonorrhoea was 8.6%(95%CI: 6.8-10.7; 77/892), chlamydia was 8.7%(95%CI: 7.0-10.5; 95/1,093), HBV was 0.6% (95%CI:0.1-1.6; 3/545)), and HCV antibody positivity was 10.0%(95%CI: 7.4-13.2; 45/448). The HCV testing rate was 37.6%(462/1229).

Conclusion: PWID, especially gbMSM, carry a significant burden of STIs and blood-borne viruses. This study underscores the urgent need for integrated sexual health and harm reduction services, expanded HCV testing, and targeted health promotion.