

Point of care blood borne virus testing for clients who inject drugs

Authors:

Potts L¹, Whitton, B¹, Myler D¹, Furler J¹

Background: Since its inception, the only supervised injecting facility in Victoria, the Medically Supervised Injecting Room (MSIR) in Richmond, has been one of the busiest point of care testing sites in collaboration with Kirby Institute's National Australian HCV POCT Program and St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne.

Methods: The MSIR offers hepatitis C screening using point-of-care (POC) testing, incorporating baseline assessments (pre-treatment workup) and 12-month follow-ups. Clients who test positive for hepatitis C are promptly linked to onsite treatment with the BBV team, with ongoing tertiary support from an HCV nurse. Direct-acting antiviral (DAA) therapy prescriptions are provided within the week by General Practitioners, with support from specialist gastroenterology and hepatology as needed.

Results: During 2024, four hundred and forty-seven clients were tested, including 119 clients who undertook testing for the first time. With the prevalence of HCV positive clients estimated at 11 per cent of clients, thirty-four clients initiated HCV treatment during the year.

Many clients have complex care coordination needs, including co-existing mental health disorders, drug use, and chronic conditions, making consistent healthcare engagement difficult. BBV staff provide assertive individual management, maintain engagement with clients and provide linkages with primary care, outcomes and housing support. The unique environment of the MSIR allows for regular engagement with clients at risk of infection and re-infection.

Engaging clients in hepatitis C testing is further complicated by venous access issues, a common challenge among people who inject drugs. This, coupled with previous trauma related to blood taking in hospitals is a commonly reported barrier by clients.

Conclusion: While point of care testing is an important modality in engaging this client group, flexible and individualised wraparound care is critical to achieving high rates of testing and treatment.

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¹ North Richmond Community Health