

UNDERSTANDING DIVERGENT FAMILY RESPONSES TO A BLOOD BORNE VIRUS DIAGNOSIS

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Background:

We know family support is highly valued following the diagnosis of a transmissible and stigmatised infection. However, most of the literature on disclosure within families is focused on HIV, with far less on hepatitis B and C, and very little has investigated the perspectives of family members themselves.

Methods:

This presentation draws on a sub-set of 22 interviews from the 'my health, our family' study, the first to document the experiences of families (broadly defined) affected by HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C in Australia. Focusing on the participants with a family member diagnosed with HIV (n=14), hepatitis C (n=6) or hepatitis B (n=2), some of whom themselves had experiences with one or more of these viral infections, we explore their reported responses to a BBV disclosure in the family.

Results:

Shock and sadness were the initial responses of most, although a few were "not surprised", citing the diagnosed family member's "lifestyle". Those who had not been told for some time since diagnosis, particularly mothers, could feel they had been left out of a family secret. All described an intention to be supportive, but conceptualised this in different ways. For some, the whole family became intimately involved in the emotional, clinical, financial and social response to the diagnosis. For others, support was demonstrated by *not* getting involved, as a way to show trust in their family member's capacity to manage their health independently.

Conclusion:

The stories of family members of people with viral infections are rarely heard. Our findings remind us that family responses are relationally and temporally situated, shaped by pre-existing relationships and communication styles, and time since diagnosis. This highlights the importance of understanding what influences family responses to disclosure and diagnosis, to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting families affected by stigmatised and transmissible infections.

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