

Finding the “missing” in the hepatitis C response in NSW: A systemic response

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Background: In New South Wales, Australia, the target date to eliminate hepatitis C as a public health challenge is 2028. In this project we explored key informants’ understandings of the strengths and gaps of HCV elimination response, with view to recommend strategies for immediate implementation.

Methods: Interviews were conducted with 28 key informants in NSW, national and international roles. Interview transcripts were coded by key elements of frameworks (eg WHO building blocks; cascade of care). In addition, thematic analysis explored participants’ views on the meanings of “elimination” and “missing” and how these meanings are or could be actioned in implementation.

Results: In discussing elimination, participants focused on “finding people” for testing. Far less discussion was focused on connecting people to treatment, liver care post treatment and stigma. There was a range of opinions on who was “missing out” on hepatitis C services and it is possible that these differences could cause division within the sector. Also, responses in key services (such as alcohol and other drug services) were considered to be “patchy”, and that work remains to be done in some geographical areas. Participants strongly endorsed the need for innovation; that continuing with current approaches would not achieve elimination. There was concern among participants that investment in elimination efforts could be withdrawn. This was against the backdrop of the higher costs of engaging people not yet reached.

Conclusions: Understandings of what elimination is and how best to achieve it are not “settled”, even in resource and data rich settings like Australia. Central and local leadership is required to direct sustainable elimination efforts informed by local information in a context of contested understandings of what is required. These efforts also require clarity in communications to ensure that the goals of elimination are not lost in a “testing shorthand”.

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