

## **VEND-C. Evaluating distribution of rapid HCV-antibody self-testing kits via needle/syringe vending machines: A protocol paper**

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**Introduction and Aims:** Hepatitis C virus (HCV) affects approximately 58 million people globally. New treatments make HCV elimination feasible, however, to realise this potential, sufficient people need to be diagnosed, but only 20% of those living with HCV are aware of their status. In 2021, the World Health Organization released recommendations for HCV self-testing, stating that it “should be offered as an additional approach to HCV testing services”.

In most international regions, people who inject drugs remain the group most at-risk of HCV infection. Syringe dispensing machines (SDM) provide sterile needles/syringes via anonymous vending machines and are a cost-effective means of delivering injecting equipment with 24-hour availability and may reach sub-populations who do not prefer fixed-site needle and syringe programs. SDMs may also dispense additional public health items, such as HCV self-testing kits.

Given the previously demonstrated effectiveness of HIV self-testing and the acceptability of HCV self-testing, there is a clear rationale for exploring the feasibility and effectiveness of distributing HCV self-testing kits to people who inject drugs via SDMs.

**Design and Methods:** In this paper we describe the VEND-C study protocol to dispense HCV self-testing kits through an SDM in a South-Eastern region of Melbourne, Australia, including methodology, modifications to testing kits, provision of necessary information to SDM clients and project evaluation.

**Results:** As an exemplar study, VEND-C provides crucial information for the replication of similar work internationally.

**Discussions and Conclusions:** This world-first research project will greatly inform the delivery and expansion of HCV testing modalities internationally, providing crucial data to support ongoing HCV elimination efforts.

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