HEPATITIS C IMAGINARIES: FINDINGS FROM A NEW STUDY ON STIGMA, DISCRIMINATION AND POST-CURE LIVES

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Background: With the advent of direct-acting antivirals, we are being invited to imagine a world without hepatitis C, where peoples' lives are radically transformed by cure. This optimism – about an imagined 'post-cure world' – overlooks the deep-seated nature of discrimination and other stigma associated with hepatitis C and injecting drug use. Legal and policy frameworks are especially relevant here as they have the potential to reinforce stigma and discrimination. Drawing on results from a major new ARC-funded study on hepatitis C, stigma, discrimination and post-cure lives, we explore the possibility that the progress and transformation promised by cure is more complex than we might think, and consider the implications of these complexities.

Methods: We offer a thematic analysis of how legal processes shape post-cure lives, derived from: legislation governing hepatitis C (e.g. identifiable notifications) and over 1000 cases from numerous areas of law (e.g. immigration, social security, privacy, disability discrimination) that deal with hepatitis C.

Results: Legal processes complicate simplistic imaginaries of the transformative power of cure, and of a singular 'post-cure' world. The legacy of laws and policies devised in a pre-cure world appear instead to be capable of generating and limiting new ways of being. This includes the making of legal subjects who are simultaneously (medically) 'cured' and (legally) 'marked' as perpetual hepatitis C subjects.

Conclusion: Legal processes undermine claims about a singular, post-cure world, in which people are imagined as no longer marked by hepatitis C, or subject to stigma and discrimination. Such processes have numerous implications. For instance, they may weaken the degree of confidence people may place in cure. We offer some reflections on necessary reforms.

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