

Peer-implemented point-of-care antibody testing for hepatitis C infection to enhance linkage to hepatitis C RNA testing and treatment: the EMPOWER study

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Background/Approach:

Despite significant improvements to hepatitis C care in Australia, key populations still face barriers to accessing care. Peer-implemented point-of-care hepatitis C antibody testing with immediate reflex point-of-care RNA testing is a crucial advancement to outreach-based hepatitis C testing. The aim of the EMPOWER study is to evaluate this model.

Analysis/Argument:

EMPOWER is a sub-study of the National Australian Hepatitis C Point-of-Care Testing Program. Hepatitis NSW peer workers, who have lived experience of hepatitis C and treatment, work in partnership with healthcare teams to offer point-of-care testing at services accessed by priority populations. Trained peer workers engage with participants, conduct enrolment and consent, and assist with completion of a behavioural survey. Eligible participants are offered point-of-care hepatitis C antibody testing (INSTI; 1-minute to result) conducted by the peer worker, with immediate reflex to point-of-care hepatitis C RNA testing (GeneXpert Fingerstick Testing). People with a history of HCV infection instead receive immediate point-of-care RNA testing.

Outcome/Results:

During 32 outreach events between August 2023 and December 2024, 512 participants were enrolled (34% female, median age 47 years, 25% reported recent injecting [last month], and 32% reported current homelessness). 385 antibody tests were performed by peer workers at study enrolment, and 177 RNA tests were conducted by the healthcare team. 9.1% of those who received antibody testing were antibody positive, 97% of whom immediately received on-site RNA testing. 21 participants have tested RNA positive, of whom 2 spontaneously cleared. Of the 19 participants eligible for treatment, 6 have initiated treatment.

Conclusions/Applications:

With 90% of participants being antibody negative, EMPOWER is reducing clinic time and resources spent on engaging and testing patients. Peer workers provide a supportive, non-judgmental, and effective pathway for affected communities to access hepatitis C testing and should be considered a central element in point-of-care testing in all outreach sites.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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