

Developing a community-based hepatitis C programme using HCV-antibody screening and HCV-RNA plasma separation cards.

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Background/Approach:

The Central Region Hepatitis C Programme is one of four regional services funded by Health New Zealand (NZ) | Te Whatu Ora. Services are guided by a national hepatitis C (HCV) action plan which identifies people who inject drugs (PWID), people living with HCV, and Māori as priority groups. Identified priority settings are needle-exchanges, Corrections, primary and community healthcare settings, and alcohol and other drug services.

Analysis/Argument:

Reducing stigma and barriers to accessing HCV diagnosis and treatment are key strategies. We implement this by collaborating to provide access and support within accepted community services (such as needle exchanges), employing peer workers who can use both HCV-antibody finger-prick point-of-care testing (POCT) to screen for exposure and plasma separation cards (PSC) for determining HCV-RNA by capillary blood sampling, and in-house clinicians.

Outcome/Results:

From February 2022 to February 2026 over 12,600 HCV-antibody POCT were completed; 350 were positive to HCV exposure, an overall incidence of 2.8%. Rates of HCV exposure were much higher in needle exchanges, where a third of the POCT were positive. Māori are 29% of all people screened.

PSC for HCV-RNA analysis after positive HCV-antibody POCT was introduced in November 2023. By February 2026 over 140 samples had been collected, by then accounting for a third of all HCV-RNA analyses at Wellington Hospital. Interestingly HCV-RNA is not detected in about 70% of PSC samples (excluding samples collected for sustained virological response).

By February 2026 over 360 people with hepatitis C have been through active follow-up with the Programme.

Conclusions/Applications

High HCV-antibody POCT volumes and incidence of positive results indicate an acceptable and targeted screening programme. Further investigation is required to determine if the high rate of undetected HCV-RNA in PSC samples is due to community use for rechecking status or a higher laboratory detectability threshold.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The Central Region Hepatitis C Programme acknowledges the financial support of Abbvie in the provision of HCV-antibody screening resources and clinical staff professional development.