

Mental health consumers have low Hepatitis C knowledge, but support routine Hepatitis C care: Results from an interview conducted in six Australian inpatient units

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Background: People with mental illness face a higher likelihood of contracting Hepatitis C (HCV) when compared to the general population. While mental health services are a recommended setting for HCV testing and treatment, such care is not routine practice. This study aimed to explore HCV knowledge and perspectives related to receiving HCV care among mental health consumers.

Methods: Mental health consumers were recruited from six public mental health inpatient units (5 metropolitan, 1 rural) in New South Wales. Participants completed an interview conducted by mental health staff (nurse, peer work or occupational therapist). Quantitative data (HCV knowledge and care perceptions) were analysed in SAS using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data (HCV care barriers, facilitators and preferences) were analysed in NVIVO using thematic codebook analysis.

Results: Sixty participants (55% male) aged 18 to 65 years completed the interview. Most participants identified at least one correct method of HCV transmission (72%). However, large proportions of the sample reported not knowing anything about HCV symptoms (38%) or treatment (62%). Most participants had positive perceptions related to HCV care, such as agreeing that routine HCV testing should occur in mental health units (80%), feeling comfortable talking to unit staff about HCV (82%), and being likely to accept HCV treatment if needed (97%). Thematic analysis identified four themes across 27 qualitative interviews: mental health units are an opportunistic and supportive environment for HCV care; stigma and privacy concerns underscore care preferences; education and strategies to promote awareness of HCV are needed; and the importance of follow-up care.

Conclusion: Mental health consumers are open to receiving HCV care in mental health inpatient settings, but their HCV knowledge is low. Our study strengthens the need to develop strategies to enhance HCV knowledge and for integrating routine HCV testing and care in mental health settings that is aligned with person-led care.

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