HCV SELF-TESTING AS A GATEWAY TO IDENTIFICATION AMONG KEY POPULATIONS WITH NO PREVIOUS HCV SCREENING EXPERIENCE IN JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

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Background:
Limited access and low uptake of Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) testing services have contributed to a significant proportion of individuals being unaware of their HCV status. Recognizing the urgency of addressing this gap, the World Health Organization (WHO) emphasized the importance of community-based testing approaches to achieve HCV elimination goals. Building on the success of HIV self-testing, Hepatitis C Virus Self-Testing (HCVST) emerges as a promising strategy to expand testing coverage and reach populations underserved by traditional testing modalities. In Johannesburg, South Africa, we conducted a study to assess the operational characteristics and impact of HCVST among key populations (KPs), including people who inject drugs (PWID), people who use drugs (PWUD), men who have sex with men (MSM), and sex workers (SW).

Methods:
Assisted implementation of HCV self-tests was conducted at the Yeoville Harm Reduction Site and ANOVA Outreach Programs in Johannesburg. Participants accessing HIV services were offered HCV self-tests (oral-based and blood based). Participants found positive on the self-test were offered confirmatory testing. Recruitment from May 2023 to March 2024, a total of 1512 participants had been enrolled. Of these, 1471 (97.3%) reported never having been tested for Hepatitis C.

Results:
Among participants with no previous HCV testing experience, 972 (66%) tested positive on HCV self-tests, and 898 (92.4%) consented to confirmatory testing. A total of 832 (56.6%) individuals tested positive on PCR, indicating active HCV infection.

Conclusion:
HCV Self-Testing proved to be an effective strategy for identifying HCV infection among key populations with no prior testing experience. By integrating HCVST with existing HIV services and community outreach efforts, we successfully reached individuals who may have been missed by conventional testing modalities. These findings underscore the potential of HCVST as a vital component of comprehensive HCV elimination strategies, facilitating early diagnosis and linkage to care for underserved populations.

A Disclosure of Interest Statement: