

TITLE: ARE AUSTRALIAN PHARMACISTS WILLING AND PREPARED TO OFFER HEPATITIS C SERVICES? FINDINGS FROM A REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF COMMUNITY PHARMACISTS

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Background: The World Health Organization (WHO) has set a global goal to eliminate hepatitis C (HCV) by 2030. For this to occur, Australia must increase its testing and diagnosis of HCV substantially, including exploring new models of care. Expanding access to care through other healthcare professionals such as community pharmacists is one pathway to help achieve HCV elimination. This study aims to explore Australian community pharmacists' willingness and comfort in discussing and offering HCV testing and treatment.

Methods: An online anonymous survey was conducted between August and October 2023 amongst a sample of community pharmacists from Victoria, New South Wales, Western Australia and Queensland. Pharmacists were asked about their experiences of and comfort and willingness to provide HCV testing or treatment. Predictors of each outcome were examined using logistic regression.

Results: One in five pharmacists indicated they stock HCV medications within their pharmacy (n=117, 22%). Pharmacies in rural/remote settings (95%CI [1.04, 2.35], p=0.03) and pharmacists that provide opioid agonist treatment (95%CI [1.16, 2.49], p=0.006) were more willing to offer HCV testing, as were pharmacists who indicated they were comfortable discussing overdose prevention (95%CI [1.31, 2.80], p=0.001). Pharmacists with >15 years' experience (95%CI [0.44, 0.94], p=0.022) were less willing to offer HCV testing, compared with pharmacists with <15 years' experience. Females were significantly less comfortable discussing HCV testing (95%CI [0.45 -0.98], p=0.039), compared to males.

Conclusion: This is the first Australian study to explore pharmacists' willingness and comfort to discuss and offer HCV treatment. Targeted training, education and support for pharmacists who were less willing or comfortable, may increase HCV testing in community pharmacies to ensure equitable access to HCV treatment across Australia.