

The legal needs and experiences of people living with hepatitis B in Australia – findings from Australia’s first national study of the legal needs of people with blood-borne viruses

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Background: An enabling legal environment is central to the effectiveness of public health responses to hepatitis B, however there is limited evidence on the legal experiences of people living with hepatitis B (PLHBV) and the health-related impacts of legal issues. The *Fourth National Hepatitis B Strategy* (2023-2030) includes an enhanced focus on law, with a specific target to establish ‘a baseline of the negative impact of legal and human rights issues in people’s health and wellbeing for people affected by hepatitis B by 2025’.

Methods: The Legal Need Study (LeNS) is the first-ever national study of the everyday legal experiences of PLHBV in Australia and was designed to produce this evidence base of national legal need and its health-related effects. We report selected results from a national survey conducted as part of LeNS with PLHBV (n=432) from every state and territory in Australia.

Results: Survey results indicate that PLHBV experience high rates of ‘justiciable’ (legal) issues in ways that are socially patterned, including and beyond living with hepatitis B. These include justiciable issues across multiple areas of law: goods or services (83%), employment (72%), debt (69%), housing (67%) and government services (65%). PLHBV report experiencing serious legal problems or disputes regarding rented housing (82%), hepatitis B-related discrimination (81%), state intervention in relation to hepatitis B status (81%), injuries or health problems arising from negligent or incorrect medical treatment (78%), and poor working conditions (72%). 63% of participants report that their most serious legal issue was caused or made worse by their hepatitis B status.

Conclusion: The results of LeNS indicate an urgent need for the expansion of targeted, specialist legal services, information and advice to PLHBV in Australia, and specific reform to law, policy and guidelines in areas including migration, education, social services, housing, health care and employment.

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