

Migration Policy and Viral Hepatitis: Navigating Policy Reforms and Health Outcomes in Australia

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Background:

Migration is central to Australia's economy as well as social and cultural diversity. In 2022, 70% of all people living with chronic hepatitis B in Australia were born overseas.

Since 1 July 2024, hepatitis B screening has been expanded to all visa applicants aged 15 or older from high-risk hepatitis B countries. Despite knowing their hepatitis B status, many individuals may not be seeking care due to misinformation, stigma, discrimination and care that is not culturally or linguistically appropriate.

Analysis:

Mandatory hepatitis B testing during the visa application process has provided opportunities for: (i) early identification and management of hepatitis B cases, (ii) reduction in transmission risk, (iii) linkage to care programs, and (iv) enhancing public health outcomes.

Hepatitis B presents a multifaceted social and public health challenge, with new migrants often deterred from seeking care due to incorrect information, stigma, discrimination, and potential cost implications if they are not eligible for Medicare or covered by insurance. To address these issues, a multi-sectoral approach is essential. Collaboration between government agencies, healthcare providers, and community organisations is necessary to tackle barriers to access. A coordinated strategy ensures that barriers to care are addressed, and individuals receive the necessary support and timely integration into the healthcare system. This comprehensive approach leverages the strengths and resources of various sectors, creating an effective and inclusive pathway to care.

Outcome:

Implementing intersectoral solutions tailored to the needs of the affected population will improve hepatitis B outcomes by (i) increasing engagement in regular care, (ii) ensuring access to healthcare without fear of stigma and discrimination, and (iii) enhancing public health outcomes.

Conclusions:

Australia's migration policy, including mandatory hepatitis B testing, offers opportunities for early identification and management of hepatitis B. However, a multi-sectoral approach is essential to address barriers such as stigma, misinformation, and healthcare access.

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