

EARTH Study - Phase 1

Expanding access to rapid treatment for hepatitis c

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Background:

Homeless populations include a large proportion of individuals at high risk of hepatitis C (HCV) infection and associated liver disease compounded by lifestyle factors such as alcohol. The EARTH Study is a programme of work to develop services for community based screening, liver assessment and supported treatment for homeless people. Phase 1 aims to assess the feasibility and effectiveness of peer facilitated active case finding for HCV among homeless people accessing an NHS mobile health unit.



Methods:

A peer outreach worker with personal experience of HCV treatment interviewed people with HCV risk factors who were accessing homelessness services across London. Testing was outreached using the Hepatitis C Trust or the Find&Treat mobile health unit. The peer provided point of care testing for HCV antibodies (HCV-Ab) using the OraQuick® HCV Rapid Antibody oral fluid test. All patients testing positive were referred to specialist Hepatology services.

Results:

A total of 845 people were approached for testing, 444 declined with 72 (16%) doing so as they already knew their positive status.

Of the 401 individuals tested, 74 were HCV-Ab positive. Of these, 40 (54%) already knew their status (at least HCV-Ab positive) and 34 (46%) were new diagnoses. The average age among those who were positive was 42 years and over a third were currently injecting. Forty-seven percent of all those reporting an injecting drug use history tested HCV-Ab positive.

Conclusion:

This confirms that there is a high prevalence of HCV among homeless people opportunistically screened across London. A high proportion knew of their status but had disengaged from treatment services; this model of testing presents an opportunity for re-engagement.

Similarly, a considerable proportion were currently injecting and therefore at high risk of contributing to transmission amongst the homeless. This pilot data confirms that outreaching and testing in non-traditional settings can reach individuals with undiagnosed HCV who are at high risk of transmitting infection to others.