

PAST EXPERIENCES OF STIGMA SHAPING PRESENT PERCEPTIONS OF HEALTHCARE AMONG PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS LIVING WITH HEPATITIS C

Goutzamanis S^{1,2}, Doyle JS^{1,3}, Thompson A^{4,5}, Dietze P^{1,2}, Hellard M^{1,2,3}, Higgs P^{1,6} on behalf of the TAP study group

¹Disease Elimination Program, Burnet Institute, ²School of Population Health and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, ³Department of Infectious Diseases, Alfred Health, ⁴Department of Gastroenterology, St Vincent's Hospital, ⁵Department of Medicine, University of Melbourne, ⁶Department of Public Health, La Trobe University

Background:

Experiences of stigma and discrimination are common for people who inject drugs living with hepatitis C virus and widely conceptualized by Goffman's 1963 idea of 'spoiled identity'. We explored the impact of experiencing stigma when diagnosed in a vastly different era of care on participants' current perceptions of healthcare.

Approach:

An interpretivist phenomenological approach was adopted to explore participants' unique experiences and perceptions. In-depth interviews were conducted with sixteen participants between February 2015 and August 2016, who were recruited through the Treatment and Prevention study. The Treatment and Prevention study seeks to assess the feasibility of treating people who inject drugs living with hepatitis C with direct acting antivirals in community based settings. Interviews were broad and flexible, focusing on participants' diagnosis experience and perceptions of wellbeing. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically.

Outcomes:

Most participants (63%, n=10) were diagnosed with hepatitis C ten or more years prior to interview, when hepatitis C had not yet or only recently been discovered and care was limited. Participants reported a range of diagnosis settings, including; research studies, prison and unrelated visits to healthcare providers. Participants reported a generally poor diagnosis experience, often feeling stigmatised by healthcare professionals. Despite the time that passed, participants had a strong recollection of diagnosis and continued to express unease or distrust towards healthcare professionals, assuming they would not receive the same level of care as non-injectors.

Conclusion:

Past experiences of stigma during hepatitis C diagnosis may contribute to continued mistrust and anticipation of future stigma from healthcare providers. It is important to understand whether this acts as a barrier to treatment. It will also be important to develop strategies to engage people who inject drugs in treatment that overcome persisting negative perceptions of care based on past experiences with hepatitis C diagnosis and care.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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