

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON HARM REDUCTION SERVICES IN ADDICTION CENTRES AND ON THE DAA TREATMENT INITIATED IN THE BALEARIC ISLANDS, SPAIN: PRELIMINARY RESULTS FROM A NOVEL HEPATITIS C ELIMINATION PROGRAMME

Herranz A¹, Pujol C¹, Vilella A², Picchio CA¹, Agius A³, Alonso JM⁴, Rodríguez A⁵, Perrotta A⁶, García L⁷, Mercadal B⁸, Serrano J⁹, Fernández F¹⁰, Anoz L¹¹, Doran J^{12,13}, Buti M^{14,15}, [Lazarus JV](#)¹

¹Barcelona Institute for Global Health (ISGlobal), Hospital Clínic, University of Barcelona, Spain,

²Department of Gastroenterology, Son Llàtzer Hospital, Palma de Mallorca, Spain, ³Unitat de Conductes Addictives 1 (IBSalut), Palma de Mallorca, Spain, ⁴Unitat de Conductes Addictives 4 (IBSalut), Palma de Mallorca, Spain, ⁵Centro Penitenciario de Mallorca, Palma de Mallorca, Spain, ⁶Projecte Home Mallorca, Palma de Mallorca, Spain, ⁷Asamblea Cruz Roja Oficina, Palma de Mallorca, Spain, ⁸Hospital General Mateu Orfila, Menorca, Spain, ⁹Hospital Universitari Son Llàtzer, Palma de Mallorca, Spain, ¹⁰Hospital Comarcal d'Inca, Inca, Spain, ¹¹Hospital Can Misses, Eivissa, Spain, ¹²National Infection Service, Public Health England, London, United Kingdom, ¹³London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, United Kingdom, ¹⁴Department of Internal Medicine, Hospital Universitario Vall d'Hebron, Barcelona, Spain, ¹⁵CIBERhd, Instituto de Salud Carlos III, Madrid, Spain

Background:

Spain is one of the countries hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely limited the provision of healthcare. This study aims to describe the impact of the pandemic on hepatitis C care for people who use drugs (PWUD) on the Balearic Islands, Spain.

Methods:

A cross-sectional study was conducted with a questionnaire electronically administered to addictive behaviour units (n=10), a prison (n=1), non-governmental organisations (n=3) and a mobile methadone unit (n=1) on the Balearic Islands (Ibiza, Mallorca and Menorca). In addition, data on the number of direct-acting antiviral (DAA) treatments initiated in 2019 and 2020 were requested from public hospitals. Standard descriptive statistics were used to report key outcomes.

Results:

Results were obtained from 33% (5/15) of centres and 66% (4/6) of hospitals. During the COVID-19 Spanish State of Alarm, all centres (n=5) maintained their operating-hours but adapted services provided, including the adoption of telemedicine in 60% of centres. Only some centres reported maintaining essential services, including opioid substitution therapy in 80%, needle and syringe programmes in 60%, overdose-prevention education programmes in 40% and mental health services in 60% of centres. The prison continued to offer DAA treatment and began COVID-19 testing. All centres reported an increase in mental health problems as the main issue faced by PWUD during the State of Alarm. Data on DAA treatment from the six public hospitals demonstrated a substantial decrease (46%; SD: 10.9) in the number of DAA treatments initiated in 2020 in comparison to 2019.

Conclusion:

Preliminary findings indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the provision of harm reduction services on the Balearic Islands, including the number of DAA treatments initiated. Telephone calls and telemedicine became valuable tools to maintain access to services.

As the pandemic continues, additional strategies are urgently needed to maintain these essential services for this vulnerable population.

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