

## HIGH LEVELS OF HCV TRANSMISSION AND A NEW OUTBREAK OF HIV INFECTION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AMONG PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS IN THESSALONIKI, GREECE

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### Background:

Thessaloniki is the second-largest city in Greece with approximately 1,200 People Who Inject Drugs (PWID) (2016 estimate). Anti-HCV and HIV prevalence among PWID accessing drug treatment programs in 2018 was 57% and 0.7%, respectively. We aim to assess the prevalence and the levels of transmission of HCV and HIV in community-recruited PWID during 2019-2021.

### Methods:

ALEXANDROS was a “seek-test-treat” community-based program where PWID were recruited through Respondent-Driven Sampling over five consecutive recruitment rounds during September 2019–July 2021. Individuals could participate in multiple rounds but only once in each round. Participation included interviewing, HIV/HCV testing, counselling and support for linkage and retention to HCV/HIV treatment. Anti-HCV and HIV prevalence were estimated using the number of PWID found positive at any participation. To estimate HCV and HIV incidence, we analysed data from 131 and 379 initially seronegative PWID with  $\geq 2$  available samples, respectively. The seroconversion time was estimated as the midpoint between the last negative and first positive test date.

### Results:

In total, 1,101 unique PWID were recruited. Participants had a mean (SD) age of 40.1 (8.5) years; 54.0% were current PWID (injection in the past 30 days), 79.7% were not linked to opioid substitution treatment programs and 15.0% were homeless. Anti-HCV and HIV prevalence (95% CI) was 62.9% (60.1%-65.8%) and 7.0% (5.48%-8.50%), respectively. HCV and HIV incidence rates (95% CI) were 16.0 (10.1-25.4) and 7.0 (4.8-10.2) new infections/100 person-years, respectively. Two-thirds of the identified HIV cases were newly diagnosed.

### Conclusion:

ALEXANDROS was successful in reaching rapidly a large number of PWID most in need despite the difficulties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from the high levels of HCV transmission, we documented a high HIV incidence indicating the emergence of an HIV outbreak that coincides with the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of social distancing measures.

**Disclosure of Interest Statement:**

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