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Introduction

- In England, hepatitis C virus (HCV) is one of the main causes of liver disease, with ≈90% of HCV infection attributed to injection drug use (IDU).¹
- This highlights the critical role of drug and alcohol services in testing for HCV and linking to care those with active HCV infection.
- However, challenges of the pandemic saw a sharp fall in the number of HCV tests carried out between March–August 2020 in Drug Treatment Services (DTS), threatening NHS England ambitions to achieve HCV elimination by 2030.
- While testing picked up in Q4 of 2020, a robust plan of action was needed in 2021 to return HCV testing in DTS to pre-pandemic levels.
- The Hep C Drug Treatment Providers Forum was set up in September 2020 as a partnership between NHS England, Turning Point, NHS Addictions Provider Alliance (17 NHS Trusts), Change Grow Live, Humankind, We Are With You, The Hepatitis C Trust and Gilead Sciences Ltd in response to the need for DTS to come together with a united approach to achieve HCV elimination in DTS, and to address the challenges to, and decline in, HCV testing and linkage to care brought about by the pandemic.

Aim

- To increase the number of individuals being screened and linked to care for HCV across partnered DTS, such that they return to and exceed pre-pandemic levels.

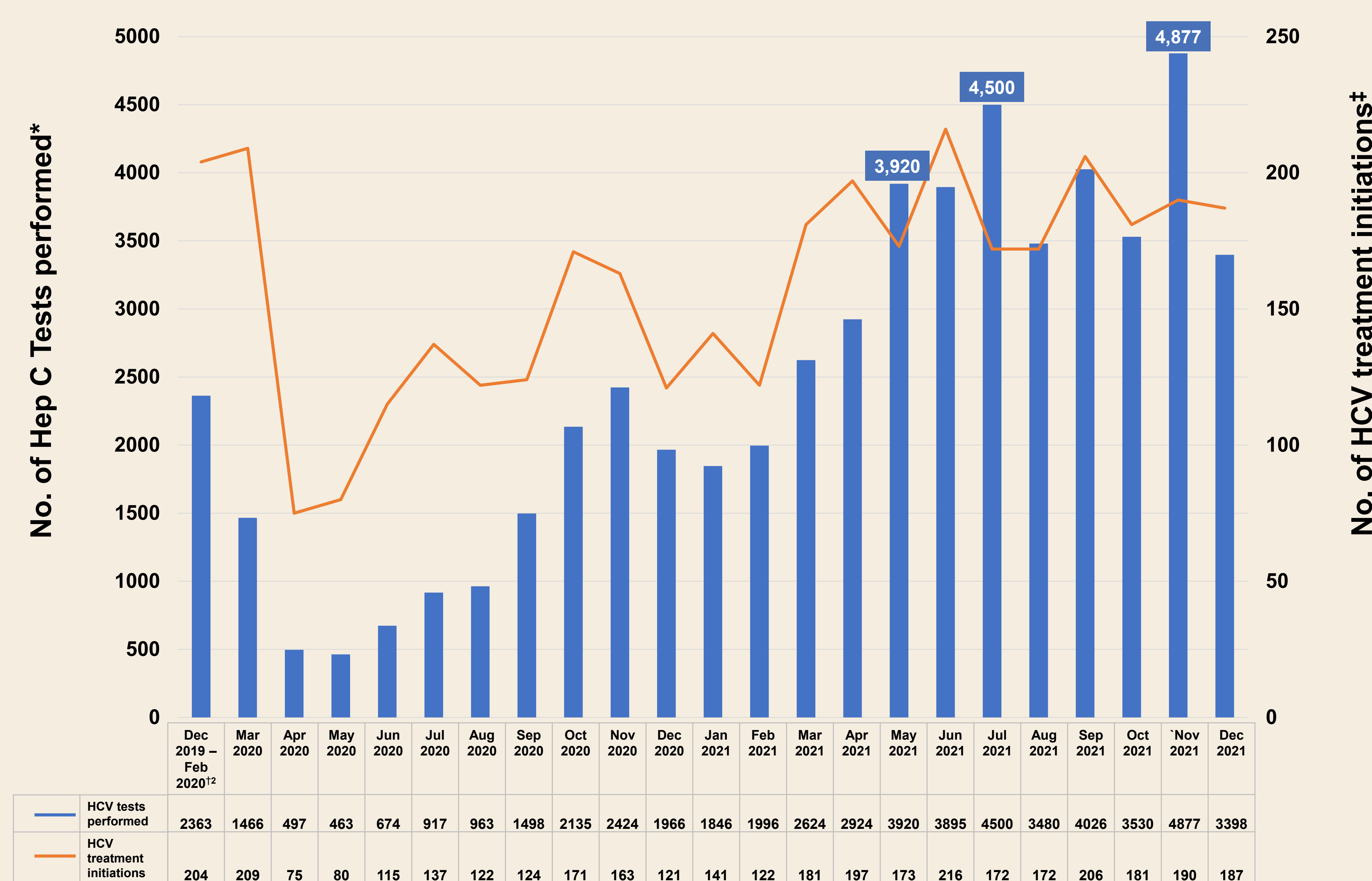
Methods

- The Forum developed a calendar of HCV testing events for 2021: April Awareness Week (25 April–1 May 2021); May Testing Month (May 2021); a Testing Week to mark World Hepatitis Day, which takes place on 28 July (26 July–1 August 2021); and DTS partners actively participating in European Testing Week (22–29 November 2021).
- Utilising the Forum-led awareness campaigns, a robust communications plan was developed and strategically deployed across partnered services to publicise each testing event, including simple key messages about HCV risk factors, symptoms, testing and treatment.
- Forum-partnered services encouraged all-staff and -client engagement at their sites during the testing events, with initiatives including, but not limited to, stepping up training on HCV for ground staff, staff awards for ‘top testers’, vouchers for clients visiting drug treatment services to refer a friend for HCV testing, and strengthening partnership working with Hep C Operational Delivery Networks (ODNs) to ensure that those who have active HCV infection were referred for and received treatment.

Results

- In total, 41,016 HCV tests were carried out in member DTS in 2021* – up 131% from 2020 (n=17,729†).
- Testing numbers peaked in member DTS during or immediately following the months of Forum-led HCV testing events:
 - April Awareness Week (25 April–1 May 2021)/May Testing Month (May 2021): 3,920 tests
 - Testing week to mark World Hepatitis Day (July 2021): 4,500 tests
 - European Testing Week (November 2021): 4,877 tests.
- Across partnered DTS providers reporting HCV treatment initiation data, there were 2,138 new patient treatments in 2021, compared to 1,317† in 2020.
- In the 6 months prior to the pandemic, between September 2019–February 2020, 13,560 HCV tests were recorded in partnered DTS²; comparatively, in the same 6-month period post-pandemic between September 2021–February 2022, 23,585 HCV tests were recorded, not only returning to but exceeding pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 1. Monthly testing and treatment initiations in partnered DTS, 2020–2021



First national lockdown: 26/03/20–10/05/20
 Second national lockdown: 05/11/20–02/12/20
 Third national lockdown: 06/01/21–12/04/21

First HCV Testing Week: April Awareness Week, 26/04/21–01/05/21
 Testing Month: May 2021
 Second HCV Testing Week: Marking World Hepatitis Day on 28 July, 26/07/21–01/08/21
 Third HCV Testing Week: Aligned to European Testing Week, 22/11/21–29/11/21

* Monthly testing data reported to NHS England by Gilead Sciences between March 2020–February 2022. Drug Treatment Service providers that have contributed to these data: Change Grow Live (CGL), Humankind, NHS Addictions Provider Alliance (APA), Turning Point, We Are With You
 † HCV testing data between December 2019–February 2020 based on total figure reported in Salehi S et al (2021) = 7,089; figure of 2,363 shown in first bar of graph represents an average monthly testing figure across this 3-month period.
 ‡ Monthly data reported to NHS England by Gilead Sciences. Note, these figures are underreported as recording treatment initiation data varies between DTS provider partners. The true number of treatment starts across partnered DTS is estimated to be higher.

Conclusions and next steps

- Enhanced collaboration between DTS providers and an effective system-wide partnership resulted in increased HCV testing and linkage to care in partnered DTS throughout 2021, accelerated by increased screening during Forum-led HCV testing events.
- With sights fixed firmly on achieving Hep C elimination in DTS, and including new partners Westminster Drugs Project (WDP), the Forum has again led a schedule of HCV testing events in 2022; very high rates of testing have been observed in April/May 2022 and July 2022 as a result of these events.
- Going forward, in 2023, it will be important to deploy more targeted strategies for HCV testing in line with newly agreed Micro Elimination Criteria for DTS to ensure all individuals at risk are tested, re-tested annually if still at risk, and linked into care through optimised HCV pathways.

References

- HSA 2022. Hepatitis C in England 2022. Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/105727/1/HCV-in-England-2022-full-report.pdf. [Accessed September 2022]
- Salehi S et al. International Conference on Health and Hepatitis Care in Substance Users (INSHU), 13th–15th October 2021, virtual; Poster #195.

Disclosure of Interest Statement

Gilead funds, and has an active role in the design and execution of, the HCV elimination activities within the named DTS providers, as part of the NHS England HCV Elimination Programme.