"I don't understand why things like that aren't mandatory"

People in Victorian Prisons' Views on Universal HCV Opt-Out & Point-of-Care Testing in Prison

Background

Hepatitis C care is well established in Australia's prisons; in 2022 one third of all treatments nationally were initiated in prisons. However, to reach elimination goals adaptations to existing programs are necessary to reach more people living with hepatitis C. Structural and social barriers to accessing in-prison hepatitis C testing remain; universal opt-out and point-of-care testing may mitigate some of these barriers.

Study Aim

The aim of this study was to understand the experiences of people's access to hepatitis C testing and treatment while incarcerated in Victorian prisons, and their perspectives on strategies to improve access to testing and treatment services in prisons.

Study Methods

Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 participants in one women's prison (n=9) and two men's prisons (n=16) in Victoria, Australia between December 2022 to May 2023. Interviews examined participant's hepatitis C testing and treatment experiences and knowledge, and perceived barriers and enablers to increase prison-based testing. Interview data were analysed thematically.

Participant Characteristics	Women	Men
Gender	9	16
Mean age in years (range)	39 (25-45)	38 (26-50)
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	3	1
Mean # imprisonments	7 (1-20)	9 (1-20)
Sentenced	5	12
On remand	4	4
TOTAL	9	16

Results

Overwhelmingly participants believed universal opt-out hepatitis C testing should be adopted in prisons. Participants believed universal optout HCV testing has the potential to address several barriers that prevent the uptake of HCV testing and treatment in prison, including exposure to stigma, poor knowledge about hepatitis C and how to access HCV services in prison, and other access barriers. Point-of-care testing at reception to prison was endorsed for being quick and easy, addressing the hassle of making an appointment, and alleviating the anxiety of waiting for pathology and results. Several participants described challenging venous access creating hesitancy for standard blood testing; point-of-care testing was considered one way to avoid this.

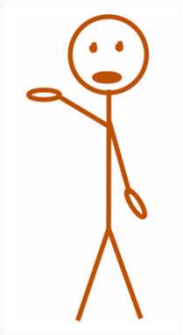
Participant Testing & Treatment Experiences	Total
Completed DDA treatment in prison	12
Currently completing DAA treatment in prison	3
HCV tested in prison & awaiting results	3
Awaiting HCV testing in prison	1
HCV tested in prison (cleared virus naturally)	1
Wants to be tested in prison	4
HCV positive but never treated	1
TOTAL	25

Victorian State-wide Hepatitis Program (SHP)

The Victorian State-wide Hepatitis Program (SHP) provides viral hepatitis assessment, treatment and monitoring to people imprisoned in Victoria. Operated by St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne, the program was funded by the Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety during the study period. The SHP is a decentralised, nurse-led, state-wide program. Regular in-reach clinics are held in the prisons. People in prison can access the program through referral by prison healthcare staff or by request.

> … It's two seconds, they're only gonna prick your finger, you know what I mean. No-one's gonna say "no" to that, yeah […] everyone wants to get better, no-one wants to be sick, you know what I mean. […] they don't have to say, "Do you want us to test you for hep C", it's just a part of the process, yeah, it just gets done yeah, and people just accept it, you know what I mean.

> 100% […] I think it will make everyone feel more comfortable doing it. […] I just, yeah, I kind of wanted them to ask me if I wanted to get tested for anything, but they didn't. Some people do get asked, some people don't.



> … in jail we get straight, we get clean, yeah. What better time to do it. There should be something, an option, cos it's saving lives, it's something they should offer you, yeah. It shouldn't be something that's so hard to do […] And a finger prick, how quick is that, you know, how easy. They can do it at a shooting gallery. Why can't they do it here? […] Because accessing the program here, you have to ask, if you don't ask, you don't get, yeah.

Conclusion

Participants in our study were overwhelmingly supportive of adopting prison-based universal opt out and point-of-care testing. Our study demonstrates how providing universal opt out hepatitis C testing in Australian prisons could help address current access barriers hindering hepatitis C elimination.

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