

# Optimising opportunities to provide harm reduction counselling

Hepatitis C testing in people who inject drugs should be combined with harm reduction counselling to reduce risk behaviours and alcohol use following hepatitis C diagnosis.

## THE ISSUE

Hepatitis C is prevalent amongst people who inject drugs (PWID) due to transmission through needle sharing and other activities. Hepatitis C testing and counselling enables provision of harm reduction and prevention advice to people undergoing testing or being informed of a new diagnosis. If effective, this may contribute to a reduction of hepatitis C incidence and transmission. However, the evidence for its impact is mixed.

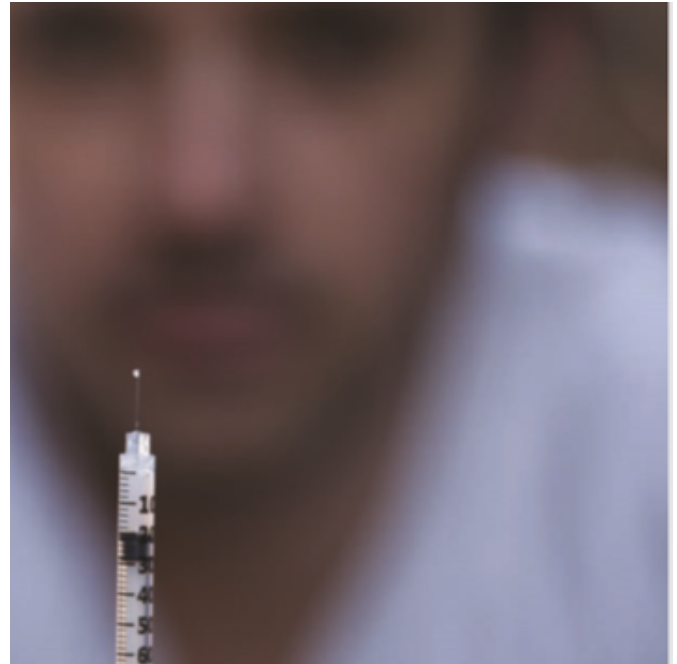
## WHAT OUR WORK FOUND

The International Collaboration of Incident HIV and HCV Infection in Injecting Cohorts (InC<sup>3</sup> Study) includes pooled data from multiple prospective studies of PWID in Canada, the United States, The Netherlands and Australia. Utilising data from InC<sup>3</sup>, Burnet Institute researchers and colleagues assessed the impact of hepatitis C diagnosis on an individual's injecting behaviour and alcohol use. The researchers included two groups of PWID: 190 who were diagnosed with hepatitis C and 190 who remained hepatitis C negative. The main findings were that:

- ▶ some injecting behaviours became less common after hepatitis C testing. In particular, there was a small but statistically significant decrease in recent injection drug use following a positive diagnosis of hepatitis C, and a statistically significant reduction in recent syringe borrowing following hepatitis C testing in those who were hepatitis C negative.
- ▶ there was no statistically significant difference in injection behaviour after receiving hepatitis C test results between those who were diagnosed with hepatitis C infection and those who were not.
- ▶ hepatitis C diagnosis was associated with an increase in alcohol use, compared to those who were not diagnosed with hepatitis C, especially in younger PWID.

## CONCLUSION

Changes in injecting drug use behaviours were seen in PWID after hepatitis C test result notification, but no statistically significant differences were detected between people receiving positive and negative results. Interestingly, increased alcohol use was associated with testing positive for hepatitis C infection.



## Policy Implications

- ▶ Notification of hepatitis C test results to individual PWID is an important opportunity for drug and alcohol harm reduction counselling and education.
- ▶ Novel communication strategies should be considered to improve the impact of counselling.
- ▶ Tailored counselling should be considered – for example, alcohol-related resources may be particularly pertinent for younger PWID.

For complete details, contact **Dr Tim Spelman** ([tim.spelman@burnet.edu.au](mailto:tim.spelman@burnet.edu.au))

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