COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy among Australians who use drugs

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Introduction and Aims: The success of Australia’s COVID-19 vaccination program is dependent on high levels of vaccine uptake, which may be undermined by vaccine hesitancy. In 2019, 3.4 million Australians reported past year illicit drug use. Therefore, establishing rates of vaccine hesitancy and barriers to uptake among people who use drugs is of public health importance.

Design and Methods: The Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) and Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) are national cross-sectional studies comprising annual surveys with sentinel samples of people who inject drugs (PWID) and people who use ecstasy and related stimulants, respectively. In both studies, participants reported their COVID-19 vaccination status and unvaccinated participants reported barriers to uptake. PWID only were asked whether a pre-determined list of vaccination characteristics, settings, rewards and penalties would facilitate their vaccine uptake. Data on vaccine uptake, hesitancy and facilitators will be presented descriptively. Finally, logistic regression will be used to establish factors associated with vaccine hesitancy.

Results: Data collection is ongoing and will be completed in July. Preliminary results indicate vaccine hesitancy is higher among PWID (53%) than people who regularly use ecstasy (25%). Key barriers reported among both groups related to vaccine safety, vaccine side effects, and low risk perception of contracting COVID-19.

Discussions and Conclusions: These findings are highly relevant to current vaccine rollout in Australia. Results may inform targeted rollout of vaccines to people who use drugs. Understanding facilitators to vaccine uptake among PWID is particularly pertinent given the high level of hesitancy.

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