THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON HCV CASCADE OF CARE IN VULNERABLE POPULATIONS IN SLOVENIA: RESULTS OF A NATIONAL STUDY

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Background:
By January 2020, a two million population of Slovenia was on track to reach hepatitis C virus (HCV) elimination by 2030 if current HCV testing and treatment rates continued. With declaration of COVID-19 epidemic on March 12, 2020 five hospitals managing all HCV-infected patients in Slovenia were transformed to COVID-19 hospitals. We aimed to assess on national level the impact of COVID-19 epidemic on HCV cascade-of-care, especially in people who inject drugs (PWID) and prisoners.

Methods:
Nineteen clinical specialists for HCV management from five hospitals were invited to complete a 28-question survey on annual HCV cascade-of-care given at their hospitals, separately for the years 2019 and 2020. Obtained data was further statistically analysed.

Results:
Compared to 2019, 75% decrease in number of persons attending free anonymous HCV testing was observed in 2020 (1629 vs. 413); besides, we noted 65.5% decrease in number of HCV confirmatory tests performed (2017 vs. 13219), 57.7% decrease in HCV RNA positive results (248 vs. 143), 45% decrease in number of patients with newly diagnosed chronic hepatitis C (110 vs. 61), 91% decrease in number of patients diagnosed with acute HCV infection (11 vs. 1), and 50% decrease in number of HCV-related referrals (1898 vs. 951) (Figure). In 2020, 46% (104/226) of planned introductions of HCV treatment were realised with a significantly lower proportion of PWID compared to non-PWID (39% vs. 69%; p<0,001); besides, 63% decrease in number of referrals by PWID (323 vs. 864; p<0,001) and 47.5% decrease in number of referrals by prisoners (94 vs. 179) was noted compared to 2019.

Conclusion:
The results present a significant negative impact of COVID-19 epidemic on all steps of HCV cascade-of-care in Slovenia, especially in PWID and prisoners. Further studies are needed to evaluate impact of these findings on HCV disease burden in the context of HCV elimination goal.

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The impact of COVID-19 on number of HCV referrals in 2019 and 2020 in Slovenia