

## HCV PREVALENCE AND RISK BEHAVIOURS AMONG PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS ATTENDING NEEDLE AND SYRINGE PROGRAMMES IN LISBON, PORTUGAL

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### Background

Globally, 71 million people are estimated as living with chronic hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection, with approximately 2 million new infections annually. One of the goals of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the WHO Viral Hepatitis Strategy is the elimination of viral hepatitis as a public health threat. In Portugal, 100,000 – 150,000 people are estimated as HCV chronic carriers, of which 50,000 have already been treated. Among People Who Inject Drugs (PWID), the HCV prevalence is estimated at around 80%. Screening for HCV infection and subsequent linkage to care is essential to achieving the benefits of direct-acting antivirals (DAA).

### Methods

From March 2018 to March 2020, we enrolled PWID attending Needle and Syringe Programmes in Lisbon. Face-to-face interviews were performed by trained harm reduction workers collecting sociodemographic information, drug use patterns, associated behaviours, and HCV testing history. An HCV point-of-care rapid test was used, and those with HCV Ab<sup>+</sup> were offered linkage to care at a reference hospital.

### Results

175 PWID were included in the study. These individuals had a mean age of 42.1±8.33 y.o., mainly males (89.7%; n=157), 37.7% (n=66) were living in the street in the previous 12 months. In terms of drug consumption, the mean age of first-time injection was 23.2±8.54 y.o., most were injecting heroin (82.9%; n=145), powder cocaine (63.4%; n=111) and crack cocaine (43.4%; n=76) in the last 30 days. Of all, 123 individuals had a reactive result for HCV Ab test, providing an HCV prevalence estimate of 70.3% (95% CI: 62.9%-76.9%).

### Conclusion

In Portugal, DAA are available since 2015, but PWID still present treatment uptake rates below standards. This study represents the first HCV prevalence estimate among active PWID, contributes to a better estimate of the those in need of HCV treatment and to increase knowledge on this population.

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