

EFFECT OF SOCIAL DISTANCING MEASURES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS IN THESSALONIKI, GREECE

Tsirogianni E¹, Syrsa V², Roussos S², Trafali D³, Tsiagka D³, Gavalaki A³, Papanikolaou Z³, Tampaki A³, Paraskevis D², Kalamitsis G⁴, Goulis I¹, Hatzakis A^{2,3}

¹Fourth Department of Internal Medicine, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Hippokraton General Hospital, Thessaloniki, Greece

²Dept. of Hygiene, Epidemiology and Medical Statistics, Medical School, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

³Hellenic Scientific Society for the Study of AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases and Emerging Diseases, Athens, Greece

⁴Hellenic Liver Patients Association "Prometheus", Greece.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken to reduce its impact are expected to affect disproportionately vulnerable populations, such as people who inject drugs (PWID). Aim of this study is to assess the impact of social distancing measures during the first lockdown (March-April 2020) in a sample of community-recruited PWID in Thessaloniki (the second largest city in Greece).

Methods

PWID were recruited to a community-based intervention for HCV infection using Respondent-Driven Sampling (ALEXANDROS program). After obtaining informed consent, a subsample of 279 consecutive participants were interviewed on the impact of the pandemic on drug use and access to harm reduction programs and were tested for SARS-CoV-2 IgG/IgM.

Results

The mean (SD) age of the participants was 40.6 (8.7) years, 88.2% were male, 88.8% were of Greek nationality and 55.1% were active users (injecting in the past 30 days). Almost all respondents (96.4%) reported that their quality of life was affected during the pandemic; 76.6% felt isolated, 31.6% felt that no attention was paid to their drug use problem at that time, 7.4% reported reduced access to health facilities and 7.1% experienced difficulty in finding food and shelter. The main difficulties that they faced during the lockdown were travel restrictions (21.9%), access to drugs (10.8%) and access to syringes (7.9%). Only one person reported a previous test for SARS-CoV-2 (0.4%). Of those who were on opioid substitution programs at that time (30/279), 30% (9/30) reported that the lockdown affected the services of the program and their participation in it. The prevalence of IgG and IGM antibodies was 2.5% (6/237) and 0.8% (2/237), respectively.

Conclusion

In the first lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, PWID were affected with the vast majority feeling isolated. Drug use appears to have been unaffected during the lockdown and difficulties in accessing substitution programs were reported.

A Disclosure of Interest Statement

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