

HEPATITIS C INFECTION AMONG PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS: A RETROSPECTIVE COHORT STUDY USING ADMINISTRATIVE HEALTH RECORDS

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Background Drug use is a major driver of the hepatitis C virus (HCV) epidemic in Italy, with an estimated prevalence up to 64.3% and evidence of ongoing transmission. Direct-acting antivirals (DAAs) can cure HCV in about 95% of patients after 8-12 weeks of treatment. This study aimed to describe the features of chronic HCV infection among people who use drugs (PWUD) in Tuscany and evaluate the impact of regional policies.

Methods A retrospective analysis of administrative health records was performed to identify all PWUD resident in Tuscany in 2015-2020 using two sources: exemption codes for problematic substance use and prescriptions for opioid agonist treatment. Data linkage was performed with HCV treatment prescriptions over the same period. PWUDs were stratified by gender and age.

Results In the period 2015-2020, 1734 PWUD have been treated for HCV with DAAs in Tuscany (12.6% out of all patients treated), 1.386 males (79.9%) and 348 females (20.1%); 33-53 age group was the most represented (69.8%) in both genders with 983 males (70.9%) and 228 females (65.5%). On average, 289 (range 113-504) PWUD patients started DAA treatment each year during 2015-2020, with a peak of 504 both in 2018 and 2019. The annual increase rate of treatment coverage among PWUD reached a peak in 2018 with a +284%, while the increase rate of all patients treated in the same year was lower (+123%). Regional testing capacity increased from 154 PWUD tested for HCV-Ab in 2015 to 1028 tested in 2020, with a peak of 1271 in 2019.

Conclusions Regional HCV elimination strategy plan was successful in optimizing health services effectiveness in treating HCV patients in Tuscany, even though COVID-19 pandemic hindered progress in 2020. PWUD remain a priority group to be identified and treated, therefore strategies towards the elimination of HCV must focus on tailored screening campaigns.

Conflict of interest

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