

HEALTH LITERACY AND CHANGES IN PATTERN OF DRUG USE AMONG PARTICIPANTS AT THE STOCKHOLM NEEDLE EXCHANGE PROGRAM DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Background:

People who inject drugs may be particularly vulnerable to the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) due to underlying health problems, stigma and social vulnerabilities. Harm reduction services, including needle exchange programs (NEP), have been subjected to varying degrees of disruption in the world, especially in the beginning of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Compared to other countries, Sweden's initial strategy toward limiting the spread and impact of COVID-19 was less restrictive to its citizens with no imposed general societal lockdown. In this study, we investigate changes in drug use, utilization of NEP associated health services, COVID-19 health literacy and the prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 antibodies among NEP clients in Stockholm during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods:

NEP visits and services provided (needles/syringes, HIV and hepatitis C tests and treatment, naloxone distributed) and overall mortality among NEP clients between January 1st and October 31st 2020, were used for trend analyses in comparison to corresponding 2019 data. Between July 27th and October 2nd 2020, NEP clients (n=232) responded to a 27 item COVID-19 Health Literacy Questionnaire. SARS CoV-2 IgG antibody tests (n=779) were performed between June 15th and October 31st, 2020.

Results:

During the COVID-19 pandemic number of clients, client visits, naloxone distribution and HCV tests remained stable compared to 2019, while distribution of needles/syringes increased ($p < 0.0001$); number of HIV tests and HCV treatments decreased ($p < 0.05$); and mortality decreased (< 0.01). Overall, the level of health literacy concerning transmission routes and protective measures, were high. SARS-CoV-2 antibody prevalence was 5.4% (95% CI 4.0-7.2).

Conclusion:

The Stockholm NEP maintained a high level of clients and services during the pandemic. In general, COVID-19 health literacy was adequate and the overall SARS-CoV-2 antibody prevalence was low compared to the general population, which highlights a need for prioritized and targeted COVID-19 vaccination among PWID.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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