TASK SHIFTING IN HCV TESTING AND RESEARCH: IMPROVING KNOWLEDGE OF HCV STATUS THROUGH A PEER OUTREACH HEPATITIS C POINT OF CARE PROJECT IN TORONTO, CANADA

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Background: Hepatitis C (HCV) elimination strategies call for task shifting to expand the range and reach of where and who delivers testing. The objective of this study was to evaluate whether point-of-care (POC) antibody testing by outreach workers with lived experience of HCV could improve knowledge of HCV status among people at risk that are not well connected to mainstream health care access points.

Methods: 11 current/former clients of a community-based HCV treatment program were hired, trained and supported to act as Outreach Workers (OW), to deliver HCV education and POC antibody testing. Participants were recruited from OWs own personal networks and in non-health care settings. Eligibility required a history of injection drug use and no prior knowledge of HCV antibody status. Participants were randomized 1:1 to receive immediate point-of-care antibody testing or testing as usual (referral to health centre HCV nurses). OWs also administered brief socio-demographic questionnaires.

Results: Of 380 participants, 68% were male with an average age 42.7 years. 54% had unstable/no housing and 65% had injected drugs in the past month. 61% had never been tested for HCV and 10% did not know if they had been tested. Of those who had been previously tested, 37% had only been tested in prison/jail. Of the 195 who received POC, 39% tested antibody positive. Of the 185 referred to the program for testing only 8 engaged in antibody testing through the health centre HCV nurse.

Conclusion: Utilizing point-of-care testing by outreach workers with lived experience of HCV allowed for engagement with highly marginalized, at risk individuals, the majority of whom had not yet been tested. This approach improved the proportion of clients who received antibody status knowledge compared to the traditional approach of referral for phlebotomy.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: Nothing to declare