

RESPONDING TO A BBV OUTBREAK IN THE MIDST OF A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

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Disclosure of Interest Statement:

No conflicts of interest.

Background:

In July 2020 a cluster of genotype 1A hepatitis C (HCV) infections were identified by whole genome sequencing. Epidemiological investigation found the cases were primarily in people who inject drugs (PWID) in Belfast, with links to homeless health services and prisons. Enhanced contact tracing and testing identified a number of additional cases of HCV infections, and new cases of HIV with phylogenetic links detected through next generation sequencing. The Public Health Agency convened an Incident Management Team (IMT).

Description of Intervention:

The IMT investigated the outbreak and co-ordinated efforts to reduce further transmission, including (1) Communications with the target population; (2) A behavioural risk factor questionnaire; (3) Enhancement of harm reduction measures; (4) Case finding; (5) Treatment as prevention via initiatives to increase access and engagement with treatment within the community and prison population.

Effectiveness:

Reduction in support for this population during the pandemic may have contributed to the risk behaviour and onward transmission of HIV and HCV.

Cocaine injecting was identified as a key risk factor bringing additional challenges when responding to the needs of users. Public health and clinical services have been diverted towards responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, however the initiatives effectively raised awareness of the outbreak. Case finding successfully identified 112 cases of HCV and 18 cases of HIV associated with the outbreak. To date 6 people have spontaneously cleared HCV and 52 people have successfully engaged with HCV treatment, 20 have become re-infected. Of the people living with HIV, 15 have been initiated on anti-retroviral therapy; 9 are virally suppressed.

Conclusions:

BBV outbreaks are challenging to control, and the COVID-19 pandemic made this even more difficult. In spite of this, the IMT was able to make a significant impact, however sustained multi-agency long term efforts are required to really address the underlying issues.