

RAPID SCREENING FOR BLOOD BORNE VIRUSES THROUGH A HOSTEL OUTREACH PROGRAMME.

McBrien B¹, O'Donovan D^{1,2}, Doyle M³, Kerr T⁴, Semple S⁵, Arnold S¹ Nugent C¹, Armstrong G¹

¹Health Protection Directorate, Public Health Agency, Northern Ireland; ²Queen's University Belfast, ³Western Health and Social Care Trust, ⁴Northern Health and Social Care Trust, ⁵Belfast Health and Social Care Trust;

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

No conflicts of interest.

Background:

An outbreak of phylogenetically linked Hepatitis C (HCV) genotype 1A and HIV infections was identified in 2020 in people experiencing homelessness in Belfast. The Incident Management Team recommended case finding across Northern Ireland to determine the extent of the outbreak, and offer treatment to those affected. This was particularly important as during COVID-19 lock down there was a reduction in face to face access to harm reduction and treatment services, and an "everybody in" policy which resulted in some people relocating to different geographical areas exacerbating the potential for regional spread.

Description of intervention:

An outreach screening programme was introduced, offering rapid antibody tests for HIV and HCV to people experiencing homelessness and who have injected drugs. To date, screening has been completed in hostels in the Northern HSCT (NHSCT) and Western HSCT (WHST) areas.

Effectiveness:

Up to March 2022 NHSCT identified 62 people eligible, 30 of whom accepted testing. There were two reactive results for HCV both with positive confirmatory viral load assay.

WHST identified 85 eligible individuals, of whom 80 accepted testing. There were 8 reactive HCV results; subsequent confirmatory testing identified 2 cases of active infection.

Whole genome sequencing of these samples is awaited to confirm association with the outbreak 3.6% of those screened tested positive for HCV, compared to 39.5% positivity rate in Belfast. All those diagnosed with active HCV were referred to hepatology and have engaged with treatment. Additional referrals were made to a wide range of healthcare and voluntary sector services to support the holistic needs of individuals.

No additional cases of HIV were identified.

Conclusion and next steps:

This programme offers some reassurance that the BBV outbreak identified in Belfast has not spread regionally, however easy access to screening must continue and made more widely available throughout all HSCT across Northern Ireland.